

# **The Shattering of Tradition:**

**Walter Benjamin's Theory of Technology**

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**IFIKK, Universitetet i Oslo**

**Av Anders Braarud Hanssen**

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"Just as the entire mode of existence of human collectives changes over long historical periods, so too does their mode of perception."

*The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*

## **1. Introduction**

In this paper I will give an overview of what can be deemed Walter Benjamin's theory of technology. I will put particular emphasis on what Benjamin defined as the "shattering" effect technological progress had on traditional notions of "experience" within modern society. Benjamin saw within technology not only a destructive, but also a liberating potential. He realized how new technologies could play a vital role in reestablishing what he called a new, mimetic "communion with the cosmos". This interaction with nature was for long suppressed by a modern paradigm of progress and rationality, and suppressed within the individual through the shock-effect of modern life. Through his critique of these aspects of modernity, he forms alternatives to the way technology is implemented within the capitalist framework. By alternative modes of technological utilization, Benjamin sees possibilities for freeing the masses from the constraints of modern capitalist mastery over the proletariat and nature. Benjamin saw this as synonymous with revolution. Through harnessing the power of the new technologies, Benjamin envisaged that the destructive "shattering" of tradition could lead to a potential healing of nature and humanity.

Benjamin saw the industrial revolutions of the nineteenth century and the First World War as symptomatic of a technological upheaval which deemed the continuation of established historical narratives problematic. Benjamin developed important aspects of his theory of technology within a *zeitgeist* of this war, and within the post-war Weimar Republic. Arguably one of the most important writers on the themes of technology, experience and modernity during this time was Ernst Jünger. I will show that Benjamin's response to Jünger's embrace of technologically rendered destruction and his Fascist aesthetization of war is formative to his own theory of technology. Further, I will illustrate how Benjamin viewed the new technologies of reproduction as symptomatic to the shattering of tradition. At the same time he saw the liberating potential within these technologies being exemplary in relation to articulating embodiment with technologies that facilitate collective experience. As a possible alternative and liberating way of interacting with technology, I show how the concept of mimesis and mimetic innervation incorporates what Benjamin envisaged as a possibility of renewed mimetic interaction with the cosmos, through seeing that use of technology one can restore the former mimetic sensibility that has become numb, or repressed through the shock-effects of modern life. A prominent example of such mimetic interaction, I will argue, is found in the mimetic way children engage with their surroundings. I will show how Benjamin saw the child's perception of the world as evidence of the presence of the mimetic faculty in modern man, and through it a non-instrumental way of relating to technology.

The writings of Walter Benjamin evade structure and consistency, and are characterized by their often problematic interweaving of such disparate themes as mysticism, mythology, aesthetics and Marxist insights. An attempt at an exegesis of his philosophy of technology faces these problems, and must often sacrifice precision for scope. In giving a sufficient room for the central issues in his thinking, I have emphasized scope, and have chosen to focus a detailed discussion of a few select concepts and themes relevant to the problem at hand, while mentioning other equally important aspects of his thinking only in brief. Starting with an introduction of key theoretical aspects discussed in this essay, such historical materialism, the concept of experience, technology and mimetic innervation, I will roughly attempt to follow Benjamin's historically founded structure based on his "triadic" story of western culture, explicated in *To the Planetarium*: 1. An original collective "edenic" state of harmony with the cosmos, 2. Modernity as technologically rendered catastrophe, or

“second Fall”, and 3. A technologically rendered redemption on the basis of this fall, or a new cosmic communion through a “second” technology, leading to a classless society, or new edenic harmony.

In undergoing an analysis of several of Benjamin’s works with emphasis on two key texts, *One Way Street* and *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility*, I will show how the issue of technological “shattering” of tradition, and its shock-effect within modernity not only reveals Benjamin’s Kantian, Marxist and Freudian influences, but also his utilization of conceptual frameworks found in the Judaic Kabbalah. In addition, I will discuss in brief his debt to new revolutionary movements in art, such as Surrealism, and his influence from literary sources, such as Marcel Proust and Charles Baudelaire. These influences were central in his quest of redefining his concept of “experience” within modernity. In them he found inspiration for retrieving a form of secular, “ecstatic experience” of the cosmos from an instrumental mode of existence. My reading of Benjamin rests on him applying an idea of the genuine auratic<sup>1</sup> trace being potentially available within this everyday, mundane experience. Further, I will attempt to show that it can be traced through how reproductive techniques, such as photo and film, invoke the faculty of what he called ‘the optical unconscious’. This reading of Benjamin’s theory of technology will in its entirety indicate what could be seen as an underlying agenda for the entire matrix of Benjamin’s complex and often contradictory texts: A rehabilitation of a classical aesthetical notion of experience through and because of what he deemed the new technologically infused “second nature”. In order to do this, I will introduce how Benjamin’s construction of his concept of experience is in fundamental ways a break from the tradition of Kantianism and German Idealism in general, and also how this break was intrinsically connected with his critique of technological progress in modernity. This rehabilitation of experience is based on his understanding of the loss of original embodiment with collective experience, schematized through a distinction between experience as *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*. Through defining how *Erlebnis* is manifesting as the predominant form of experience in modernity, I will discuss and define his concept of ‘aura’ and how it consists of a genuine trace and false substitutes.

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of "aura" refer to the feeling of awe or reverence in relation to unique or remarkable objects, artefacts, works of art or relics of historical origin. Benjamin deemed ancient cultures created auratic characteristics around objects of veneration. In opposition, capitalist modernity signifies the decay of aura, because of the proliferation of mass-replication and reproduction technologies.

Being in decay, the aura manifests itself either in its total absence or in decayed, false forms within modernity. Through a discussion of such concepts as “shock” and “phantasmagoria”, I will put the concept of aura in relief, and show how Benjamin attempted to recover traces of its original form, and found it in the contemplation of natural forms.

In connection to this attempt, a reading of his works on film and photographic technologies is central. In the last part of the essay I will define Benjamin’s interest in these technological forms as coming from a conviction of their political and aesthetic potential, and his interest in utilizing this potential to liberate the masses, previously repressed by capitalist interests. This liberation is intimately connected with the aspiration of a renewed collective communion with the cosmos. Through a comparative reading of *Artwork Essay* in conjunction with the *To the Planetarium* text, I will show how the former is a continuation of the programmatic intentions of the latter, with emphasis on the development of the notions of “first” and “second” nature, and “first” and “second technology”. The understanding of these terms are crucial to grasp his interest in the notion of *mimetic innervation*, which will be defined and discussed in conjunction with his attempt at a restoration of the classical concept of mimesis as consisting of both semblance and *play*. I will further discuss how the “second technology” differs from the first due to its origin in mimetic play. This play can be viewed as containing a liberating dimensions in the form of an increased “field of action” that before was impeded by capitalist interests in technology. I will also show how Benjamin connects the liberation of the second technology as intrinsically linked with the answer to long-repressed existential questions within western culture. These theoretical themes interrelate in what I see as Benjamin’s attempt at formulating a solution to the technologically rendered alienation that mankind is suffering from in modern society, and this solution involve a liberation of the masses through the use of technology. Within such liberation, Benjamin sees the possibility of a revolution that he calls “innervations of the collective”, and I will try to shed light on what this term refers to. My argument is based on what I see as Benjamin’s attempt at mending or re-establishing a renewed collective communion with the cosmos through a form of homeopathic effect described as innervation, and through innervation induces a form of technological *Catharsis*. I will also suggest that his use of the term *Catharsis* in relation to Film technology may be Aristotelian in nature.

Instead of focusing mainly on the well-established dimension of Benjamin's historical materialism and analysis pertaining to historical redemption, I want to conclude by posing questions relating to what a reading of Benjamin today can present in an attempt to resolve the apparent dichotomies between lived sensuous experience and the emerging technologically dominated world.

As a parenthesis, I should also mention that my intentions in presenting Benjamin's theories in this way are not to pursue a critique of his theory of technology. Instead of emphasizing Benjamin's tendency towards inconsistencies, undeveloped lines of reasoning and often opaque and enigmatic language, I will restrain my criticism and instead attempt to focus on the often neglected sub-strata of coherence, hidden connections, and neglected conceptual relations in his theories. I will out of this intention instead invoke a very modest work of mending together in a greater mosaic what in Benjamin's writings is fragmentary and aphoristic, and often undeveloped or unfinished<sup>2</sup>.

Our relations with technology are often marked with ambivalence. In many ways technology defines and structures our reality to such an extent that we feel enframed by it. At the same time it is an intrinsic component in our way of perceiving this reality. Benjamin saw that through technological change, our ways of perceiving reality, our mode of perception must change also. The same can be said of our conceptions of past, future and of human nature as such. These problems occupied many thinkers in the beginning of the last century. What separates Walter Benjamin from his contemporaries is how differently he approached the issue of technology. As Susan Buck-Morss emphatically claims, Benjamin's project has the potential of changing the entire conceptual order of modernity. Nothing less: "Benjamin's critical understanding of mass society disrupts the tradition of modernism, (...), by exploding the constellation of art, politics and aesthetics into which, by the twentieth century this tradition has congealed."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Examples of Benjamin's unrealized, abandoned or uncompleted projects abound both in his early, middle and late period. From his early period, theories of colour, logic, language, epistemology and ontology are left undeveloped. Arguably the most prominent of his unrealized works is *the Passagen-werk*, a thousand page text of montage-like character, unfinished and unpublished in Benjamin's lifetime.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered*. October Magazine, Vol. 62, 1992, p. 5

## 2. The 'Tigers Leap' in history

For Benjamin the modern age is beset with the consequences of a technological evolution marked by "the fact that technology serves this society only by producing commodities"<sup>4</sup>. From this perspective he embarks on an attempt to reveal the forces that channels technology down destructive paths, cloaked in what he defined as rhetoric of progress, and finally culminating in world wars. When, at the beginning of the 20th century, it became apparent for Benjamin that "the speed of traffic and the ability of machines to duplicate words and writing outstrip human needs. The energies that technology develops beyond this threshold are destructive. First of all, they advance the technology of war and its propagandistic preparation."<sup>5</sup> Not only technological warfare, but the very apparatus that paves the way for such carnage thrived on the use of the technologies of reproduction. In these technologies, Benjamin saw a process that leads to a "tremendous shattering of tradition, which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind"<sup>6</sup>. Bearing witness to a deployment of modern technologies against mankind that radically altered history, he saw language and public space utilized for propagandistic purposes and experience. But Benjamin still believed that mass culture and the technologies of mass media ultimately had the power of redemption, making the utopian "classless society" an end and the empowerment of the proletariat its means.

My reading of Benjamin rests on his seeing of the present historically. He read the past not as a unified entity or whole, and not as a unified, written narrative. Benjamin meant that to see the present, is to see the past in it, due to it being made up of the objects of history. To read the present, he dwelled on fragments and isolated images from the past which again could be rearranged. Through this way of reading the present, history can be a tool of, *and* resituated within the present.

Benjamin realized that human perception, our way of experiencing reality, is not given, but a product of history. By being temporally anchored, experience becomes related to the changes in historical time, and through these changes, mankind can potentially become aware of previous unacknowledged dimensions of reality. Bridging the gap between the primal past and the future utopia rests heavily on

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<sup>4</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian, Selected Writings, Vol. 3 (abbreviated SW1,2,3 below), Cambridge, Mass. and London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002, p. 266.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 266

<sup>6</sup> W. Benjamin, The Work of Art in the Age of Its Reproducibility, Selected Writings Vol. 3, p. 104



Benjamin's theory of revolution. Without the redemptive capacity of revolution, the possibility of re-establishing an alternative to the alienated capitalist modernity is beyond reach. This revolutionary vision is redemptive, and stands in contrast to the social-democratic, and vulgar-Marxist myth of progress as self-sufficient, self-evident, and a harbinger of boundless improvement. Benjamin often refers to Auguste Blanqui (1805-1881), the legendary revolutionary fighter who had nothing but scorn for the belief in technological progress. The basic presupposition of his activity was not this illusory belief but the decision to put an end to present injustice. "This decision, at the last moment to pull humanity out of the impending catastrophe which threatens it, is precisely for Blanqui, more than for any other revolutionary politician of his time, the essential criterion."<sup>7</sup> Progress is to be overcome by revolution, as a 'tiger's leap into the past'<sup>8</sup>. Benjamin does not want a Rousseauian 'return to Nature', but instead describes a search for the lost paradise, an edenic harmony between human beings, and between humanity and nature. The pre-historical classless societies envisioned in the 1935 *Exposé* of the *Passagen-werk* was for Benjamin a picture of a possible Utopia, where technological development is not running counter the needs of mankind. Although this theme toned significantly down in later texts, the theme reappears in *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire* (1939), where one can discover a new version of the opposition between present 'hell' and a 'lost paradise'. The central trait of this modern 'hell' is here the degradation of experience that reveals itself within the alienated life of the masses, confined to standardized, 'denatured' existence, and its inhospitable, overwhelming nature, as it exists within large scale industrialism. In particular the life of the unskilled worker, whose labor 'has been sealed off from experience', degraded, standardized, regimented and reduced to automaton by modern machinery.<sup>9</sup> As a consequence of this conception of modern life as 'hell', we can see a basic premise for understanding Benjamin's theory of historical materialism, critique of progress, and technology in particular; Irving Wohlfarth defined it as his network of "mytho-historical" triads<sup>10</sup>. According to, this structure can be described roughly as follows;

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<sup>7</sup> W. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, , Hanna Arendt (Ed.), Trans. Harry Zohn, New York, Cape, 1968 p. 262.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 263

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 158-59, p.178

<sup>10</sup> Irving Wohlfarth, Walter Benjamin and The Idea of a Technological Eros, A tentative reading of "Zum Planetarium", in Walter Benjamin, *Language, Literature, History*, Reinton & Anderson (eds.) Solum Forlag, p. 125

1. Myth/Paradise: collective, ecstatic communion with the cosmos;
2. The Fall/Demythologization: bourgeoisie society, Copernican science, Modernity.
3. Redemption on the basis of the Fall: A redemption of lost communion and community, classless society, and a second Copernican turn. In short, this is a post-Kantian integration of the cosmic consciousness through a "Second Technology", (i.e. new *Physis*).<sup>11</sup>

Bearing in mind that Myth and Paradise is comparable as a preference for the makeup, Benjamin is here introducing a reintroduction of mythology within Jewish mysticism.<sup>12</sup> This feature of his formation of a redeemed technological future is based on a redefined Jewish mysticism. As we shall see later, it reveals intent on Benjamin's behalf to fuse the secular and the religious dimensions of his thought. This intention shows that there cannot be any redemption without revolution. Revolution, as the precondition of the creation of a classless society comes through an interruption of history, including the uncritical faith in progress. No revolutionary action can happen without an understanding of the advent of the classless society as incorporating the shattering potential of the Messianic, or as Michael Lövy points out, "as a breaking point". Lövy continues: "Benjamin's aim is not revolution for the sake of revolution, but for him without revolution there can be no redemption, and without a Messianic-redemptive view of history, no really radical revolutionary *praxis*."<sup>13</sup>

It may prove fruitful to look closer at Benjamin's emphasis on viewing history as the history of cruelty, repression and barbarism. If this fact remains cloaked in the rhetoric of progress of the ruling classes at any given time, its true nature was revealed in the two world wars, or in the drudgery of urban life. Benjamin sees this as confirmation that truth must be wrested from the ruins of the past, not from the canon of conventional history. Benjamin refers to Marx, who stated that the ruling class constitutes what becomes the dominating world view, and through this attempt to maintain the political status quo. It is because of the conservative way culture is transmitted in history that it has a conservative effect. "Culture appears reified. Its history then becomes nothing but the residue of memorabilia that have been unearthed without ever entering into human consciousness through any authentic, political,

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 125

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 125

<sup>13</sup> M. Löwy. Revolution Against 'Progress': Walter Benjamin's Romantic Anarchism, New Left Review 152, p. 59

experience."<sup>14</sup> The purpose of a materialist<sup>15</sup> education is to provide this political experience, giving the revolutionary class the strength to dispose of those "gems" of history that are accumulated in society, "so as to get its hands on them".

There is no place for upholding the tradition in the materialist vision, and this instead creates a consciousness of discontinuity. The fold in the fabric of history is the discontinuity of the materialist historian. If all historical continuity is constituted by the ruling class, and henceforth by the historical oppressors, the break with this pattern means embracing the rupture of tradition. A breakdown of tradition implies the possibility of recovering a historical object that reveals "cracks" where one can get a hold for anyone wishing to get beyond these points"<sup>16</sup> This tradition is one of fresh beginnings, or more precisely a realization of the ephemeral character of any stasis in history. The classless society is but another facet and form of the historical consciousness. It is not the goal, but instead an unsuccessful, yet ultimately accomplished interruption.

In his early period, Benjamin believed in the possibility of metaphysical knowledge of the objective world. He insisted that there was "something perceptibly objective in history".<sup>17</sup> Instead of deeming history meaningful in itself, he saw the physical objects of the actual world as containing their historic meaning in them. He goes as far as saying that the worldly objects themselves contain the "history of the whole world within". His life long friend Gershom Scholem recorded his "extreme formulation": "A philosophy that does not include the possibility of soothsaying from coffee grounds and cannot explicate it cannot be a true philosophy."<sup>18</sup> The materiality of physical objects contained within them the 'absolute', or the truth of the entire universe, much like Leibniz monads.<sup>19</sup> The physical objects themselves did not speak, but their potential for expressing the meaning contained in them was actualized by the philosopher who translated, or "named" them.

Benjamin meant that through translating this potential into human language of

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<sup>14</sup> W. Benjamin, Eduard Fuchs, Collector and historian. SW3, p. 267

<sup>15</sup> Materialism, in Benjamin's sense, refers to the understanding of the sensuous, non-conceptual dimensions of reality.

<sup>16</sup> W. Benjamin, On the Concept of History, Illuminations. Hannah Arendt (ed), trans. Harry Zohn, New York, 1968 p. 265

<sup>17</sup> S. Buck-Morss, Dialectics of Seeing, Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project, Cambridge, Mass., The MIT Press, 1989, p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> Gershom Scholem, Walter Benjamin: The story of a Friendship. In On Walter Benjamin, Critical Essays and Recollections, Gary Smith (Ed.), Cambridge Mass., and London, England, The MIT Press, 1988, p. 59

<sup>19</sup> Howard Caygill, Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience, p. 8.

words, the objects were brought to speech. Hence, this reading “was to read what was never written”<sup>20</sup>. This speech was historical in nature, as it contained the history of their objects. Not only do the objects “speak” to us, they are mimetic in character. Thus, Benjamin sees them as naturally corresponding to the mimetic faculty in man:

But these natural correspondences are given their true importance only if we see that they, one and all, are stimulants and awakers of the mimetic faculty which answers them in man. It must be borne in mind that neither mimetic powers nor mimetic objects remain the same in the course of thousands of years. Rather, we must suppose that the gift for producing similarities (...), and therefore also the gift of recognizing them, have changed in the course of history.<sup>21</sup>

In the short text *On the mimetic Faculty*, Benjamin develop genealogies of perception as reading. Such reading is the most ancient: reading before all languages, from the entrails, the stars, or dances”<sup>22</sup>. The transformation from reading “what was never written”, to the written language of man is one of infinitely many examples of ‘decay’ or ‘transformation’ of particular configurations of experience. Written language is for him an example of a mimetic transformation – a transformation into “the most perfect archive of non sensuous similarity”<sup>23</sup>. This is the archive to which Benjamin chooses to dedicate himself, and an archive that is bound by its historical nature.

History therefore becomes a collection of facts or objects, and not a canon of linear time. Instead, the present moment has within it all of history, and historical materialism is the science of creating a philosophy out of history. This means to reconstruct historical material as philosophy. According to Benjamin, historical changes accommodate what he defines as a dialectical perception of history. In short; the present, due to its changeable nature, creates possibilities for redeeming dimensions of reality through being in flux. With flux comes disruption and upheaval, and through upheaval an opportunity to look at reality in a new way emerges. This new way of perceiving reality is not self-evident. It emerges as humanity is forced to look at what we previously took for granted, or what was previously axiomatic, or given. Thus, in Benjamin's vision, the masses can be made aware of previously unconscious aspects of reality through making them aware of the past; "The alignment of reality with the masses and of the masses with reality is a process of

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<sup>20</sup> W. Benjamin, *On the Mimetic Faculty*, SW2, p. 722

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 720

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 722

immeasurable importance for both thinking and perception."<sup>24</sup>

This mutual alignment resides as an underlying agenda permeating his theory of experience, and his theory of technology in particular. In reading Benjamin we, as readers are challenged by the fact that Benjamin's texts themselves are now part of history, and in a fluke of irony, through Benjamin's emphasis on actuality, may also be seen as outdated. But perhaps a closer look at what can be salvaged of Benjamin can teach us something more about our present age.

Through our perception, we actively create the world. Benjamin stated it enigmatically: "Perception is reading"<sup>25</sup>. We experience the world through actively reading it. As Sholem noted later, Benjamin early on "occupied himself with ideas about perception as a reading in the configurations of the surface – which is the way prehistoric man perceived the world around him, particularly the sky."<sup>26</sup>

How should we then read Benjamin? After being introduced to his historically grounded thinking, our reading may be elicited when facing our present discussion: By way of introduction, consider the following four terms, interlinked and mutually dependent; Experience, Shattering, Technology, and Mimesis.

### 3. The Concept of Experience

To grasp Benjamin's emphasis on technology's role in the destruction of traditional experience, we now need to turn to one of his most fundamental and ongoing problems; his notion of the concept of experience. Experience is a critical category in Benjamin's thought, arguably the most important one. He develops a dialectical relation between two already existing types of experience within the Germanic philosophical tradition: *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*. To understand his use of these concepts and to grasp their significance within his notion of the shattering of traditional experience, we need to look closer at Benjamin's early period of production, where he launches a radical critique of the Kantian concept of experience, and how he found it "limited" in scope.

*Erfahrung* is the tradition-bound type of experience, unfolding over time,

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 722

<sup>24</sup> Walter Benjamin, The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, SW1, p. 105.

<sup>25</sup> W. Benjamin, On Perception, SW1, p. 93

<sup>26</sup> Gershom Sholem, Walter Benjamin, History of a Friendship, On Walter Benjamin, Critical Essays and Recollections, Gary Smith (ed.), MIT Press, 1988 p. 61

being inseparable from the representation of continuity, and is inherently sequential.<sup>27</sup> *Erlebnis* refers to the isolated, immediate individual experience, detached from tradition or historical origin. Neo-Kantian and empirical schools of thought emphasized the former, due to the fact that it stresses the outer sensory stimuli and conceptual reflection on objective experience, making for a more rounded, coherent narrative out of experience. The latter became understood as more subjective, inner experience, infused with romantic notions originating with Goethe, Dilthey and others. Benjamin has initial objections to both concepts, developing instead a dialectic between these two varieties of experience, in an attempt to overcome their subject-object distinction. It is important to note at this point that Benjamin's emphasis on this dialectical tension never escapes the historical, material conditions of the human sensorium. As mentioned above, Benjamin always argued the historical nature of perception and experience. He stresses this basic historical perspective, and in particular with reference to how perception is constantly being altered by technological change.

The young Benjamin remained critical towards the philosophical debates of his time. Although deeply engaged in philosophical questions throughout his early writings, the canon of "bourgeois philosophical texts in no way inspired his obedient respect."<sup>28</sup> It is clear from his early writings that two of the main philosophical traditions that he is referring to is Kantianism and Hegelianism. In early works such as *The Life of Students*, and *The Metaphysics of Youth*, a complex but fascinating series of inversions of the philosophical problems in vogue in his time is explicated. What appeared out of these early texts was something approaching a non-Hegelian account of speculative experience. What is most striking is the emphasis Benjamin laid on the conviction that there is an immanent perfection residing in even the most neglected dimensions of experience. This signals a move away from the Hegelian absolute idealism which rejects the present in the name of an absolute idea, towards a materialism that unravels the absolute in what is rejected by the present order.<sup>29</sup>

Immanuel Kant is a key figure in Benjamin's intellectual life, delineating various types of knowledge through his three critiques and trying to give an account of

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<sup>27</sup> Brent S. Plate, *Walter Benjamin, Religion and Aesthetics*, p. 5

<sup>28</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing*, p. 10

<sup>29</sup> H. Caygill, *Walter Benjamin, The Colour of Experience*, Walter Benjamin, *The Color of Experience*, London, Routledge, 1998, p. 9

knowledge separate from any type of experiential realm. Yet, Susan Buck Morss explains his relationship to the sensual dimension of experience in this way: "Kant's transcendental subject purges himself of the senses which endanger autonomy not only because they unavoidably entangle him in the world, but, specifically because they make him passive (languid), instead of active (vigorous), susceptible, like 'oriental voluptuaries', to sympathy and tears."<sup>30</sup> Benjamin's philosophy cannot be reduced to any reaction "against" theories that preceded him, but in Kant's attempt to find a non-sensuous, apriori ground for experience his theory of experience may be seen as an immanent critique. It is here that we must look to find a source of his later emphasis on traditional experience, and the role of technological progress as inherently destructive. As early as 1916 had Benjamin made "immoderate attacks on Kant" and "considered his theory of experience impoverished"<sup>31</sup>.

All of Benjamin's writings may be read as anticipations of a 'coming philosophy'. In its core, this new philosophy is a radical transformation of the concept of experience established by the Kantian critical philosophy. In his early works, limited to a small number of published texts and unpublished fragments from the period between 1914 and 1921, this transformation is expounded<sup>32</sup>. In these texts Benjamin established a foundation for his later academic interest, and they are crucial to understand the interpretation of his entire *oeuvre*. Here he distanced himself from the neo-Kantianism which dominated his academic environment during his student years. His thought developed toward a recasting of Kant's transcendental conception of experience into a speculative one. His own philosophical aspiration was directed towards an introduction of "the absolute" or "infinite" into the Kantian "finite" conception of experience. Since a thorough examination of the complexity of Benjamin's early philosophical works is beyond the scope of this essay, many nuances of his conception of experience cannot be examined. It is sufficient to note that many assume Benjamin's philosophy to be a philosophy of language, and that it is above all a linguistic meta-critique of Kant.<sup>33</sup> These objections fail to recognize the complexity of Benjamin's conception of experience as not exclusively linguistic. Instead, his transcendental but speculative philosophy is pointing towards an account of

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<sup>30</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *Aesthetics and Anaesthetics, Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered*, October, Vol. 62, 1992, p. 9

<sup>31</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *The dialectics of Seeing*, p. 9

<sup>32</sup> Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin, The Colour of Experience*, p. 1

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, p. 13

experience characterized by an immanent totality.<sup>34</sup>

The project of recasting this concept of experience runs through Benjamin's early work. In the 1917 text *On Perception* and the 1918 text *On the Programme of the Coming Philosophy* this task is made explicit. In these texts he not only launches a critique of the notion of experience itself, but also Kant's basic belief in the distinction of subject and object. Further, he questions the assumption that there can be no true experience of the absolute. This critique is not only an inherent challenge to the established norms of the reading of Kantian philosophy, but towards the defining boundaries of philosophy itself. Kant's thought is marked by his emphasis on the limits of possible experience as set up by the faculty of intuition, understanding and reason. In *The Critique of Pure Reason*, he places as belonging to intuition the pure forms of intuition; space and time. The understanding consists of 12 categories, among them causality, limitation, substance, unity and plurality. To reason belong the Ideas of Reason; The World, God, the Soul.<sup>35</sup> These different faculties are defined as separate and Kant emphasizes their separateness in their contribution to experience. In Benjamin's critique of Kant, however, he insisted that there is a possibility of a connection between intuition and understanding. This connection ultimately culminates in a concept of experience where not only the distinction between the intuition and understand is suspended, but an entirely new 'speculative' concept of experience emerges.<sup>36</sup> The Kantian concepts of the intuition, understanding and reason are redefined into a concept of experience where the absolute manifests itself indirectly within spatio-temporal experience. Unlike Kant who excluded the absolute from all realms of knowledge except moral knowledge, he welcomes the concept of the absolute. Why? In short, experience, for Benjamin, is able to contain both categorical universality and rational totality.<sup>37</sup> This is possible due to his underlying intention of recasting Kant's transcendental philosophy of experience onto a speculative yet transcendental philosophy. The recasting must take into account the very structure of Kant's concept of experience, and address its problematic aspects. If a recasting of the distinction between intuition, concept and idea is to be made, Benjamin needs to show that totality, expressed within the ideas of reason, emerges within both intuition and concepts. In short, his early attempt at recasting Kant's

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 13

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p. 15

<sup>36</sup> Walter Benjamin, *On Perception*, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 1, p. 94



concept of experience was mainly a critique of a limiting philosophical framework, and as a consequence, he wished to transgress the limits of this Kantian framework, by introducing the experience of the absolute into the new philosophical space. This would become space where the Kantian triadic structure of reason, understanding and intuition is one of an infinite number of possible surfaces of experience. To do this it was necessary to redefine the Kantian topology. This implies a redefinition of infinity and totality in relation to the forms of intuition, space and time. In *On Perception*, he criticizes Kant for not being able to distinguish "Knowledge of experience" and "experience" as such:

The confusion arose from conflating the concepts of "experience" and "knowledge of experience". For the concept of knowledge, experience is not anything new and extraneous to it, but only itself in a different form; experience as the object of knowledge is the unified and continuous manifold of knowledge.<sup>38</sup>

Benjamin's speculative redefinition of Kant's transcendental description of experience involves the introduction of the absolute or infinite into the structure of forms of intuition - space and time - and the linguistic categories of the understanding. Benjamin attempted to avoid Kant's demarcation of experience, and instead introduced a concept of experience where the absolute was an immanent component. This was attempted by a new definition of the spatio temporal and linguistic realms. These realms were regarded as discrete configurations through which the absolute manifested itself in patterns, breaks and distortions. The Kantian concepts of space and time, and the categories and judgments, were seen as unbalanced and limiting in a deep way.

Fused with his notion of the limitations of the Kantian conception of experience was a growing conviction in Benjamin's thinking that these limitations were inherent in philosophy itself. The critique of Kant's philosophy implies for him a redefinition of how philosophy itself need not be restricted to philosophy as subject matter<sup>39</sup>, but instead extend its scope to include such subjects as art, literature, and culturally related issues in general. The limits of experience would be expanded in such a way that philosophy as a critical activity, or reflection could move beyond

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<sup>37</sup> H. Caygill, *Colour of Experience*, p. 16

<sup>38</sup> Walter Benjamin, *On Perception*, SW1, p. 95

<sup>39</sup> "Philosophy" in this sense relates to the overall subject of philosophy including its conceptual

what traditionally would denote a "philosophical" subject matter, as proclaimed in his *On the Programme for the Coming Philosophy*:

The decisive mistakes of Kant's epistemology are, without at doubt, traceable to the hollowness of the experience available to him, and thus the double task of creating both a new concept of knowledge and a new conception of the world on the basis of philosophy becomes a single one.<sup>40</sup>

The Kantian concept of experience is based on a Newtonian paradigm, and it's foundation in physics. This mechanistic world-view is rejected by Benjamin, and criticizes the way Kant points to science and reduces the field of experience to "a nadir, to a minimum of significance"<sup>41</sup> Benjamin objects to the way Kant scarifies scope for certainty. In line with the Enlightenment, the Kantian notion of the limits of certain knowledge excludes entire fields of inquiry from potential philosophical significance. "Experience" as a concept rested on the mechanistic model of bodies in motion, or objects, perceived by a subject. Metaphysics is rendered as outside the field of legitimate knowledge. Does Benjamin embrace metaphysics anew? He turns the question around and states that within the very core of the Kantian notion of sensuous or intellectual knowledge lays an equally metaphysical or mythological set of ideas:

In this respect, so far as the naive conception of the receipt of perceptions concerned, Kantian "experience" is metaphysics or mythology, and indeed only a modern and religiously very fertile one<sup>42</sup>

Kant's notion of distinction between subject and object is parochial, and is only one of many possible dimensions of experience. It is mythology in the same manner as totemism, and the experiences of the psychotic or clairvoyant. In contrast to the mechanistically oriented metaphysics of the Kantian tradition, Benjamin sought the intoxication of cosmic experience<sup>43</sup>. For him, this was experience in the truest philosophical conception of the word, as a conception that included a vast scope of possible realms of experience, previously defined as un-philosophical. Thus, a new

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framework of ideas, categories and language.

<sup>40</sup> Walter Benjamin, "On the Programme of the Coming Philosophy", Selected Writings, Vol. p. 102.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, p. 101

<sup>42</sup> W. Benjamin, The Coming Philosophy, SW1, p. 103

<sup>43</sup> W. Benjamin, One Way Street, SW1, p. 486

and redefined concept of experience would for Benjamin entail possibilities for a new metaphysics.

The critique of modern experience in the theoretical philosophy developed in his later writings as an exploration of the possibilities for freedom present within a decaying modern experience. In his *On the Programme of the Coming Philosophy*, Benjamin identifies the "lower and inferior nature of experience" characteristic of the entire enlightenment era, as identical with that of the modern era. In an attempt to understand and analyze the process of decay he hoped to better understand the nature of the limits of the modern experience. Through this process, he attempted to establish what possibilities of new freedom that lay dormant within this cultural dissolution. The way Benjamin attempted such an analysis was not merely to discuss and establish a critique of modernity as such, but instead to come to an understanding of the reactive and destructive elements within it, and through this reveal the inherent potential that lay dormant within element of modernity; elements that further could be redefined, transformed and made useful.

Benjamin saw the modern world as brought about through the triumph of rationality and visibility, or an "exclusive emphasis on the optical connection to the universe".<sup>44</sup> The modern world's most influential product - the printed text - has severed the ties to a more total experience of the universe, and a grander, more complete cosmological understanding. It is in line with Benjamin's reasoning to see the world as brought in line by sensory priorities through creating a technologically rendered visual spectacle of the cosmos. Interestingly, Benjamin often used the language of science and technology, but more for its rhetorical power and authority derived from scientific method. Developmental tendencies within history and modern culture dissolve aesthetics into a science and further into technologies and techniques. This reliance on a technophile, scientific discourse came from the influences of Soviet cultural avant-gardism. Various avant-garde artistic movements were immersed in the problems and discourse of science and technology in post-revolutionary Russia in the wake of 1917.<sup>45</sup> The Soviet Union became a "testing ground for Benjamin's research into the intersecting themes of social and natural sciences, and saw the Soviet Union as indicative for the potential direction of the political development in Western

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<sup>44</sup> Walter Benjamin, *One Way Street*, SW1, p. 486

<sup>45</sup> Ester Leslie, *Overpowering Conformism, Modern European Thinkers*, London, Sterling, Virginia, Pluto Press, 2000, p. 90

Europe. Starting with *One Way Street* and culminating in the 1935 *Exposé* for the *Passagen-werk*, Benjamin investigates how experience and consciousness are redefined “in light of the new technical and social reality”, and at the same time how the new technologies become “an expression of a new attitude towards life.”<sup>46</sup> Indeed, the new technological reality imposes on mankind an experience of a new “second” nature. As such, no absolute categorical distinction between nature and technology persists. These new cultural forms, he contends, necessitates a revolution in the realm of aesthetics. This revolution in the relationship between art and technology are expressions of this “new attitude”. By employing new forms of production in the aesthetic realm, novel forms of social existence can be experimented with. These new forms of existence rely on the “elective affinity” between technology and humanity, and art is the realm where this elective affinity can be played out.<sup>47</sup> S. Brent Plate views Benjamin's entire project as an attempt at an aesthetic re-evaluation of experience.<sup>48</sup> Through its decay or ruin, the aesthetic was able to actualize an additional dimension of his engagement with experience which became increasingly important to Benjamin, namely the transformation of experience in technology.

What does this re-evaluation of experience indicate? Western Philosophy and theology's search for truth has almost entirely been limited to the transcendent and/or spiritual, and thus opposed to the material. Reason, in the Kantian sense, guarantees limits and structures, aims for unity, and situates the reasoning subject in control. A way to exert control over its object of study is for the reasoning subject to maintain clear distinctions. These distinctions clearly reveal themselves in the mind-body dualism that can be seen as the key contributing factor to the denigration of the field of aesthetics.<sup>49</sup> In the western tradition, the realm of aesthetics must be appropriated by the mind and retained within the grasp of reason and logic. If not, the subject matter may be rejected as unimportant for truth. Keeping Benjamin's goal of recasting Kant's philosophy in mind, he disproves Kant's attempt to account for knowledge separate from experience.

To better grasp what Benjamin is getting at, it will prove helpful to recall the original etymological meaning of "aesthetics", as the source of his recasting of

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<sup>46</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, *Exposé 1935*, Cambridge Mass. and London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass. and London, England 1999, p. 6

<sup>47</sup> E. Leslie. *Overpowering Conformism*, p. 100

<sup>48</sup> Brent S. Plate, *Walter Benjamin, Religion, and Aesthetics; Rethinking Religion Through the Arts*, Routledge, London, 2005, p. 20

experience is also to be found at its origin. *Aisthitikos* is the ancient Greek word for what is "perceptive by feeling. *Aisthisis* denotes the sensory experience of perception. Thus, it is reality, as bodily, physical nature that originally referred to the field of aesthetics, not art. The body, through its sense faculties, was the realm of aesthetics. In short, the aesthetic is a form of cognition. As the sense faculties are all situated on the surface of the body, they are also the interface, or mediating boundary between the inner and outer reality, between the micro and macrocosm. Functioning mainly autonomously, prior to conscious cognition, the senses are "out of the mind", as they encounter the world pre-linguistically.<sup>50</sup> Even though the senses can be cultivated, there remains the fact that this occurs a posteriori (as in moral sensibilities, refinement of "taste", and sensitivity to norms of beauty). By their psycho-physical makeup, they resist cultural domestication, in their function; they are marked by their immediacy, as they serve the instinctual need for the survival and self-preservation. Why then is this the starting point for Benjamin as he embarks on a redefinition of experience within modernity? Susan Buck-Morss points to the fact that within modernity, a reversal in meaning of the term "aesthetics" occurred.<sup>51</sup> In Benjamin's time it mainly applied to the arts, not to sensible experience, and conversely to the imaginary, not the empirical world. Returning to Kant, we see in his Critique of Pure Reason, how the "aesthetic" in judgment have little emphasis on the sensory experience.

Benjamin does not clearly fit the bill of an aesthetician. Instead we need to ask ourselves why Benjamin put such emphasis on the materialistic, sensuous dimensions of reality. As seen above, he retains a materialistic understanding of aesthetics by maintaining their link to sensual perception, while also maintaining the connection between art and everyday life. This connection was leading to a "new, dynamic, dialectical aesthetics"<sup>52</sup>. This method towards a reading of modernity builds on Benjamin's conception of the traumatic impact of the First World War and how this event undermined the possibility of a recapitulation within the bounds of tradition. The impact of "one of the most monstrous experiences of world history"<sup>53</sup> destroyed all possibility of making this experience available as passing through tradition. Benjamin saw that this destruction could reveal the seeds of new potential

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p. 20

<sup>50</sup> S. Buck-Morss, Aesthetics and Anaesthetics, Benjamin's Artwork essay reconsidered. p. 6

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, p 7

<sup>52</sup> W. Benjamin, Program of Literary Criticism, SW2, p. 294

<sup>53</sup> W. Benjamin, Theories of German Fascism: One the collection of Essays War and Warrior, edited by

experiences, as these new conditions for experience were constituted by a transformed reality where technology played a key role. This new situation was seen as a new form of "barbarism", and within it rested potential for liberation and destruction, manifesting itself through the face of technology.

#### **4. The notion of shattering**

Many commentators on Benjamin have leaned towards an emphasis on the materialist and Marxist strands in his theory when shedding light on the origin of his critique of modernity and western culture. In his theory of technology, these strands become apparent when trying to piece together his theory of technology. Within Marxist dialectic, the notion of shattering appears vividly as new forces of production blast open old relations of production. The revolutionary goal of this dynamic becomes sidetracked, or diverted into unwholesome, or "unnatural", counter-revolutionary pathways in war. Yet much of what has been written on Benjamin's theory of aesthetics, and politics culminates in frustration as the disparate strands of his thought are seldom coherent and more often contradictory and ending in inconsistency. To understand the apparent inconsistencies, a more in-depth reading of his early influences from Jewish philosophy is paramount.

Walter Benjamin's entire intellectual project rests on the notion of a shattering, or rupture, of the spatial and temporal realm. The former being grounded in his critique of the Kantian concept of experience, while the other borrows heavily on Jewish mysticism and the Kabbalistic conceptual realm in particular. The destruction of continuity is distinct from total annihilation and dispersal "by the winds of history". Instead shattering implies an unsettling event or process, where things are "broken into pieces". Thus, Benjamin's conception of modernity, and his critique of technological progress is implicit with a disruption of continuous historical, epistemological and ontological narratives. Further, this notion of "rupture" is different from "destruction". Instead, the notion of "shock", which is marked by "the experience of the collapse of what was, yet without being lost to the future"<sup>54</sup> to Benjamin remains essential to the modern. The shock-experience disperses the auratic experience, creating a new perception of reality, manifesting itself in the arenas of

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Ernst Jünger, *New German Critique*, No. 17, p. 123

<sup>54</sup> Pierre Missac, *From Rupture to Shipwreck, On Walter Benjamin, Critical essays and Recollections*, MIT Press, Massachusetts, London, England, 1988, p. 214

aesthetics, politics, technology and urbanity.

To Benjamin, the modern is dominated by the ephemeral, transient and ever-new forms of capitalist industrialism. The ever-new character of the products of technological progress leaves in its wake the realization of temporality residing within these forms. Thus, the outmoded, the out-of-date, is the dialectical necessity of what we herald as "modern". Being outmoded, the ruins of the recent past, appears as residues of "a dream world". Susan Buck-Morss characterizes the disintegration of cultural forms as "endemic to modernity"<sup>55</sup>. As mentioned, modernity is characterized by the shock-experience. Based partially on Sigmund Freud's theory of war neurosis, Benjamin claim was that this battlefield experience had become the norm of urban life, and modernity in general. Freud's theory implied that consciousness prevents the shock-experience from entering deeply into the human sensory system, so not to leave permanent traces in memory. Within the poetry of Charles Baudelaire, he found a recording of this "breakdown", or "shattering" of experience, placing it at the core of his artistic work.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, Freud is a fertile source of ideas with regards to the emphasis Benjamin put on the history of the concept of mimesis.

## 5. Mending the shattered Vessel

In *Theses on the Philosophy of History* the historical materialist<sup>57</sup> shatters, or blasts an epoch of history out of historical continuum, a particular life out of this epoch, and a particular work out of this life's work.<sup>58</sup> As briefly mentioned in the introduction, the key to such a monadology lies in the implicit dimension of correspondence between micro and macro levels of reality. In short, the singular, shattered piece is in itself a whole, incorporating the larger entity from which it came. As such, each broken part is part of a Leibnizian monad. More directly, the way Benjamin applies this analogy aligns with the "shard" or "crystal" of Jewish Messianism.<sup>59</sup>

It has been noted that Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History* has share similarities with Judaism. This is evident in his conception of a momentary

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<sup>55</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *The City as Dream world and Catastrophe*, October Vol. 73, p. 2

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p. 8

<sup>57</sup> Historic materialism is originally the methodological approach to the study of society, economics and history first articulated by Marx. Benjamin's unique approach to historical materialism evolves around the notion of "redemption of the past" and not a libratory vision of the future that confirms Marx theory of history.

<sup>58</sup> W. Benjamin, *Illuminations*. Hannah Arendt (ed), trans. Harry Zohn, New York, 1968 p. 265

<sup>59</sup> Irving Wohlfarth, *The Idea of a Technological Eros*, Walter Benjamin, *Language, Literature, History*, Solum Forlag, p. 112.

"standstill" of history. Here fragments of the past are remembered through a moment of forgetting. This conception, when linked with history, points to a possibility of redemption in the "presence of the now". Benjamin rests his understanding of historical materialism on the conception of history as "monodological". This implies that singular events in history are "inspired" by a transcendental and meaningful presence to be understood only through a redeemed mankind. This understanding of the "redeeming" potential of history reveals Benjamin's debt to the tradition of Judaism. As noted by his life-long friend and scholar of the Kabbalah, Gershom Sholem, "the intimate inter-weaving of Marxist and cosmic-mystical insights which penetrate each other, or appear alongside the other..." seemingly connected by dialectic.<sup>60</sup>

The significant point for Benjamin is to valorize catastrophe rather than trying to heal it. In embracing the destructive character of the events, he attempted to defeat the catastrophe from within. In Benjamin's schema, any act of creation actually entails destruction. He shares this theme with Freud, articulated as the "death-drive" and its evolution towards homeostasis, and also the Surrealists focus on undermining boundaries between art and life.<sup>61</sup> This resembles the Jewish messianic tradition that his friend Scholem had shown often promoted mystical transgression as a means of redemption. The Kabbalah proved an important influence already for the young Benjamin, and influenced his writings in such key texts as the *Origin of the German Mourningplay*; a study of the German Baroque "*Trauerspiel*". Buck-Morss emphasizes the importance of what strong influence the Kabbalah had for Benjamin's thought and the study of Baroque "*Trauerspiel*" drama in particular:

Kabbalist thought...provided an alternative to the philosophical antinomies of not only Baroque Christian theology, but also subjective idealism, its secular Enlightenment form. Specifically, Kabbalism avoided the split between spirit and matter which had resulted in the Baroque dramatists' "treacherous" abandonment of nature, and it rejected the notion that redemption was an anti-material, otherworldly concern.<sup>62</sup>

In the Kabbalah, Benjamin found a much needed alternative hermeneutical tool to mold his thoughts into a genuinely radical alternative to philosophical tradition.

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<sup>60</sup> Gershom Sholem, "Walter Benjamin and His Angel, On Walter Benjamin", *Critical Essays and Recollections*, p. 54

<sup>61</sup> B. Plate, *Walter Benjamin, Aesthetics and Religion*, p. 29



Messianism showed tendencies of being collective, historical and materialist. These dimensions of the ancient texts created a unique theoretical surface for novel theoretical and political inscription, and fitted nicely with Marxism. Communism and Messianism both had redemptive agendas, and had both a foundation in conceptions of a future "land of plenty", where Messianism upheld an idea of new paradisiacal earth, Marxism aspired to a new, classless society.

To understand the specific philosophical conviction of Benjamin's works and on technology in particular, we need to understand how the Kabbalistic and theological structure permeates his analysis of the most profane phenomena of modern society. Siding with Buck-Morss, his entire *oeuvre*, and the *Passagen-werk* in particular "is only arbitrary and aesthetic, carrying no *philosophical* conviction, if the invisible theological armature is ignored."<sup>63</sup> What then, is Kabbalah for Benjamin?

Benjamin's theory of technology reveals the dialectic between the two intimately related concepts of dissemination, fragmentation of dispersal (*die Zerstreung*) and collection, assemblage, gathering together (*die Sammlung*). This dialectical constellation reveals itself, and has clear resemblances to the Kabbalistic notions of *Shevira* (fragmentation) and *Tikkun* (mending). In addition, the concept of decay, or withdrawal, related to the concept of aura and the "mimetic character" also can find its Kabbalistic counterpart in the term *Tzimtzum* (withdrawal, reduction). Through the action of *Tzimtzum* the wholeness of God is sacrificed.<sup>64</sup>

Being an inherent part of traditional Jewish metaphysics and theology, The Kabbalah differs drastically from the entire tradition of idealist philosophy. Although being first and foremost a hermeneutic method of reading sacred texts, its nature is that of a meta-perspective on reading meaning out of tradition. The meanings found within the texts studied are often of such a nature that they could not have been known at the time of their writing. This mirrors Benjamin's own emphasis of dialectical images as an alternative way of reading history, where traditionally, historical reading is viewed as an attempt to reveal the intent of the author. Instead the Kabbalist focuses on inventing meaning, often remote from the established and recognized "correct" readings. The main emphasis is to look for keys in the text which illuminate the time they presently live in, and through these keys unravel clues of a

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<sup>62</sup> S. Buck-Morss, *The dialectics of seeing*, p. 230

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, p. 232

<sup>64</sup> B. Plate, *Walter Benjamin, Aesthetics and Religion*, p. 29

coming Messianic Age. Accordingly, the present reality, being imbued with an all-together new conceptual horizon, transforms the way of reading the ancient texts. Put in another way, the Kabbalah "reverses the past in order to break from it."<sup>65</sup>

According to the Messianic idea, human suffering, which began with the Fall from Paradise, will come to an end with the new age. This age is named the Age of Redemption, where nature is restored to its paradisiacal state. The return to Paradise is not envisioned in any literal way. In fact, the truth of the Kabbalistic teachings are to be manifested in these "latter days", as the conditions for the ripening of the Myth of Paradise are to be revealed for the first time in history. These truths emerge with the advent of the new age, as the hidden meanings within the texts are to be unlocked with their connotations to singular historical phenomena, in unique ways. According to the Kabbalist theory, Adam and Eve are the parents of humanity, and due to this fact, Messianic redemption is viewed not only as an event which will end the "exile" of the Jews, but rather as a universal in significance: a sign of the total transmutation of cosmos. Human beings, and not divine intervention, are the key to realizing the ideal of the Messianic Age. There is no inherent mechanism within history that pushes history forward, towards the redemption. The coming of the Messiah is not synonymous with the coming of a redeemer. The sole responsibility for redemption rests on humanity. As historical agents, humans are not powerless components within a divine plan, but instead indispensable and powerful agents of the enactment of the divine principle, and the powers of creation. Man is the key to the perfection of Cosmos, due to being the sole species on the earth endowed with free will.

Man need not be reconciled with a God that is separated and lost to him. Instead, the Kabbalist view Man as alienated to God by Ignorance, and not separation. The material Nature is the source of Divine knowledge, and therefore where the relationship between God and creation is to be found. Nature, for the Kabbalist, is fragmented and shattered, but not a source of Sin or Evil. This means that knowledge of God is uncovered by mending the fragments of divine "sparks" that were spread throughout the world at the shattering of the divine Vessel (*Tikkun*)<sup>66</sup>. The task that Man and God must finish together is the healing and mending of the broken vessels of Divine Attributes. A new order is established where there before was unrest and suffering. Thus universal harmony is created, not as a return to Paradise, but as a

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<sup>65</sup> S. Buck-Morss, *The dialectics of seeing*, p. 233

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, p 232

creative act of novelty.<sup>67</sup> In Kabbalist creation myths the primordial abstraction of God (*Ein-Sof*) is originally void. It gives up its wholeness, reduces or subtracts itself as *Tzimtzum*. Through this reduction of wholeness, a space emerges where the world (*Olam*) can come into existence. In this process, God fills the void left by his withdrawal with divine light, condensed into various forms, or vessels. These vessels or forms are emanations of God, and denotes the divine attributes (wisdom, love, etc). In addition, these emanations are also connected to other formations, both divine and material. The most prominent formation is the inherent relation between the micro and macrocosm of the human body and the universe. Thus, these processes of both divine and material nature influenced Benjamin in his early period, giving inspirations to his emphasis on the conviction that to understand the bodily mimetic interactions to the outside world is to gain knowledge of the universe. The divine light is shattered in the breaking of the Vessel, leaving divine sparks to scatter throughout the material world. As we shall see these notions connect with Benjamin's notions of fragmentation, ruin, catastrophe and destruction of aura. Benjamin sees the ruins and catastrophe as inherently constructive in their state of "clearing space" for the *tikkun*, or mending of the world that is to come.<sup>68</sup> Keeping these conceptual influences in mind, the task of depicting Benjamin's analysis of modernity and technology in particular may gain more potential for clarification. In particular, the mythology of the modern world interested Benjamin. The industrialization and technologization of our bodies induces a separation from our material bodies. This happens as modern technologies create a substitution of the bodily senses, culminating in a world unaware of its own ruined or fragmented nature. Benjamin saw this as happening in the mass-mediated myths in modernity, and through the continuation of these myths, technological destruction became unrecognized until its consequence was inevitable. One such consequence was war.

## 6. The Nature of Technology

Being a relatively recent phenomenon, the philosophical treatment of technology is marked by its short history. The first work to specifically treat technology in a philosophical context was by Ernst Knapp, who wrote *Grundlinien einer Philosophie*

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<sup>67</sup> S. Buck-Morss, *The dialectics of seeing*, p. 235

<sup>68</sup> B. Plate, W. Benjamin, *Aesthetics and Religion*, p. 36

*der Technik* in 1877<sup>69</sup>. But the impact of technology on nature and man is as old as history itself. More strikingly, the impact of our use of these skills or tools, even in the remote past, is now starting to be recognized. Nearly all areas of human habitation throughout history have to a large or small degree left lasting imprints on the environment.<sup>70</sup> As a consequence, Benjamin realized that the notion of a “pure” untouched nature needed to be replaced by the understanding of the interrelation between man and nature.

The impulse to theorize over technology is part of a greater project for Benjamin. Mainly, the critique of modernity implies a critique of the economic, political and social disruption of that which remains alien, foreign and dissimilar. In short, Benjamin's writings seek through numerous ways to suspend the intrinsic value of continuity within the modern paradigm, upheld by the idea of economic progress, bourgeoisie values and power structures. More specifically, the technological analysis is part of a grand project to "re-imagine the aesthetic - in response to the technically changed sensorium, to be sure, but in a desperate effort to reassess, and redefine, the conditions of experience, affectivity, memory and the imagination".<sup>71</sup> For Benjamin this relates to a radical suspension of the subject-object dichotomy residing with the Kantian tradition, and further, to undermine the porous line of demarcation between spirit and matter on which the Hegelian tradition rests. From the outset, the concept of "Second Technology" implies a radical potential for a new, redeemed relationship between *Physis* and *Techne*, between nature and artifact, man and machine that is more in line with the actuality of his own urbanized life-world. To what extent is there a way "out" of the impasse of technological barbarism apparent in the 20th century? I will try to argue for a reading of Benjamin that sees our technologically infused cosmos as irreversible and necessary. The apparatus is already implanted in our common subjectivity and consequently there is no solution to a potential technological destruction without taking technology as playing an important role. Benjamin's vision has taken the shattering of tradition into account, and technology's power is not to be rejected or considered detrimental to society. Instead we need to find ways to re-channel this power into new and creative paths. How different his thinking is can be seen in how we can discern a more complex and ambivalent

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<sup>69</sup> Don Ihde, *Consequences of Phenomenology*, p. 79

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80

<sup>71</sup> Miriam Hansen, *Benjamin and Cinema; Not a One-way Street*, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 25 p. 325

conception of the relation between *Techne* and *Physis* than in many of his contemporary theorists of technology. In many areas of the philosophy of technology, as *Techne*, is seen as either expanding or devaluing human existence. A satisfactory discussion of this vast subject is beyond the scope of this study. A short résumé of Andrew Feenberg's distinction between "instrumental" and "substantive" theories of technology is sufficient. Feenberg argues that instrumental theory gives us the most recognized view of technology; Technologies are "tools" standing ready to serve the purpose of their users, without valuative content of its own, and these theories are dominant in the social sciences. Substantive theories, best known through the writings of Heidegger argues that technologies constitute a new type of cultural system that reorganizes the entire social world as an object of control. Technology is seen as defining reality in such an instrumental way that society is destined to be consumed by it, and therefore cannot be channeled into alternative ways of implementation. This implies a deterministic conception of technology. An additional philosophical perspective on technology comes from the Frankfurt school, of which Benjamin had close connections. Thinkers as Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse initiated an alternative *critical theory* of technology. This perspective analyzes the new forms of oppression connected with modernity, industrialism, and capitalism, and that these cultural forms offer new political and theoretical challenges. As its main area of research, these theories faced the challenge of how modern technology may be redesigned towards meeting the needs for a new and liberated society.<sup>72</sup> Critical theory approaches similar perspectives on the relationship between art, politics, technology and perception to what Benjamin's immanent critical approach had in mind.

The role technology plays in Benjamin's work is ambiguous, but is made manifest in within recurring themes of interest throughout his writings. Most directly it makes itself manifest in the themes of mechanical reproduction and the related issues of politics and aesthetics. It also plays a crucial role in that it influences the transformation of experience that happens as a consequence of the advent of modernity. In this transformation, technology merges with high capitalism, and through this process creates a loss of meaningful experience. The loss is felt at the workplace, in the mode of communication, and in the breakdown of community. This

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<sup>71</sup> Andrew Feenberg, *Critical Theory of Technology*, Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 5 - 15

<sup>72</sup> Andrew Feenberg, *Critical Theory of Technology*, Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 5 - 15

phenomenon is a recurring theme throughout Benjamin's work, and is often discussed under the theme of 'shock'. Man is no longer completely able to cope with and integrate the changes in reality brought forth by technical innovation. Technology becomes a source of defensive numbing of the sensorium. Further, technology is also potentially able to create new and redeeming forms of experience that enables the alienated subject to cope with this upheaval. In Benjamin's way of describing modern man's coping with his reality, technology is seen as either as an instrument of destruction of traditional experience or a creator of new possible futures. In dwelling on these themes, Benjamin is clarifying a main phenomenon that is essential for the understanding of his critique of modern urban culture, and technology in particular; the decay of aura. When endowed with aura, objects have an almost fetishist quality, enabling them to contain a mystifying authority. These qualities make aura an aspect of experience that comes to function as the cultural legitimation of traditional social functions. Technology is a force that for Benjamin can destroy this link between humanity and tradition, rendering it difficult for the mythological and disempowering dimensions of social and historical heritage to reproduce within the new situation. This technological force leads to the decay of aura, emptying the object of its layers of meaning and connotations. Benjamin describes the process of informing the decay of aura in terms of a local detachment of the reproduced object from the domain of tradition, one which is an aspect of a broader 'shattering of tradition'.<sup>73</sup>

Benjamin emphasizes the invention of new technologies in the 19th century as the penultimate reason for the restructuring and upheaval of experience that modern man is witness to. The 19th century's industrial revolution brought with it a speed of production where machines accelerated the very tempo of life.<sup>74</sup> The human body, through its limitations can only work a restricted number of tools simultaneously. Through the evolution of machines after the industrial revolution, the mechanization of labor had no such limitation. Where before man and his accumulated experience with his tools worked in a uniform production movement. The speed at which the machines function in production throws this way of working of kilter, and it becomes a disturbance in a world where machines produce machines. Thus, capitalist use of production technology induces a new type of communication and a new rhythm of

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<sup>73</sup> W. Benjamin, Artwork Essay, SW3, p. 104

<sup>74</sup> W. Benjamin, Arcades Project, Konvolut N, p. 462

life. Instead of being marked by natural rhythms of work and rest, modern life becomes marked by the eventual elimination of all discontinuation, of any sudden end. Production in a mechanized technological framework means continuity, production around the clock, accelerating traffic, continuous flow of information. Through the transformation of life's pace and the way technology is implemented in a capitalist framework, humanity has not been able to integrate this new situation in adequate ways. In short, the technological organization of modern life has created a situation where the interfaces between the mechanical and the organic, between inanimate and animate nature has blended to such a degree that it is no longer meaningful to speak of them dualistically. Mankind's lack of recognition of this transformation leads ultimately to the downfall of the power structures of modernity. Without recognizing it, the way man and technology is already intertwined leads to a "slave revolt of technology". Technology has developed explosively in modernity with the elemental power of a "second nature". Building on the concept of Lukács concept of nature, this notion of a "first" and "second nature" is in itself the foundation from which we can build an understanding of what Benjamin's definition of technology is, and this theme will be discussed in more detail later. Benjamin argues that Nature is closed up in the hard shell of what is called "Nature", and new "barbaric" acts will be rendered necessary to crack its shell.

In reading such texts as *One Way Street* or the Artwork Essay, an attempt to re-imagine the aesthetic dimension in reality emerges - in response to the changed sensorium of a technologically transformed experience of culture. He tries to reassess, redefine and redeem the conditions of experience, affectivity, memory and the imagination.<sup>75</sup> The 'shock' of the encounter with a technologically changed reality to the sensorium is seen as irreversible. There will be no restoration of the instinctual power of the senses and a re-emergence of a collective ecstatic communion with Cosmos without recognizing that technology has already become an ingrained aspect of the human's subjectivity. Reading his final lines in *To the Planetarium*, we are not given the alternative of distilling a purely non-technological solution to the problems facing humanity with the advent of machines. Preventing a technological Armageddon implies using technology, and recognizing this, Benjamin acknowledges the irreversibility of the historical process. He thus proclaims a collective

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<sup>75</sup> Miriam B. Hansen: Benjamin and Cinema, Not a One-Way Street, p. 235

*innervation*<sup>76</sup> of technology, instead of hoping for a return to an edenic pre-modern, instinctually intact, "natural" state. Instead of plain rejection of the way technology is used in the hands of imperialist and capitalist interest, to subdue and master Mother Nature, he sketches an alternative.

Benjamin's diagnosis of mechanical reproducibility is rather optimistic, in relation to its use in enlightening the masses. How? Media products' functionalization could enlighten the masses. In view of the loss of experience in the "age of information", norms are purged of meaning, and time has become empty and purely homogenous. As a response, Benjamin emphasized the importance of discontinuity and heterogeneity. These notions were important in order to preserve or revive the revolutionary dynamic inherent in the modern world, with its irreversible progressive character. Therefore, the notion of Barbarism and the destructive character involved in historical progress was viewed by him as necessities, and potentially liberating as well. The naive belief in progress is negated by mobilization of historical consciousness. This consciousness recognizes that trauma and catastrophe is not the exception, but instead the norm of history. "The concept of progress is to be grounded in catastrophe. That things 'just go on' is the catastrophe. It is not that which is approaching, but that which is"<sup>77</sup>. The dramatization of the present moment, *Jetztzeit*, is done with the belief that discontinuity within the continuous could be enacted as a revolutionary occasion. Redeeming is thus done by finding the fissure in the catastrophic, ongoing, evolution of history.

Buck-Morss reads Benjamin more as an accelerating spiral or vortex of decline culminating in catastrophe only mended by Messianic intervention of revolution. The pivotal elements in this theory are threefold:

- (1). Whether this spiral of decline can be transformed into a liberating and potentially revolutionary instance where technology and the human senses can be saved from succumbing to capitalist agendas,
- (2) Whether the historical notion of experience and memory can be merged with his egalitarian and anti-utopian politics,
- (3) The notion of "Profane Illumination"<sup>78</sup> of the surrealists, and how this can be

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<sup>76</sup> Innervation refers broadly to a non-reductive, mimetic incorporation of the world.

<sup>77</sup> Walter Benjamin, Central Park, New German Critique, No. 34, p. 50

<sup>78</sup> *Profane illumination* is a vital part of Surrealist experience, perception, and art in his 1929 essay "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia." (S.W. Vol. 2) It entails the process, frequently related to an altered state of perception, where the individual perceives trivial, neglected or



brought up to a more general "bodily collective innervation".<sup>79</sup> More specifically relevant to our discussion is also how this form of mimetic, bodily innervation is related to the suppressed wish of communion with cosmic powers, mentioned in *To the Planetarium*;

*...,its hour strikes again and again, and then neither nations nor generations can escape it, as was made terribly clear by the last war, which was an attempt at new and unprecedented commingling with the cosmic powers*<sup>80</sup>

Benjamin attempts to find a way to utilize this attempt at cosmic "commingling", and through ordering the relationship between man and technology.

## 7. Mimetic Innervation

This leads us to the concept in Benjamin's attempt to imagine an alternative conception of technology. *Innervation* is closely related to what in the Artwork Essay was deemed "optical unconscious", but refers more generally to a neurophysiologic process that functions as a mediator between external and internal, mental and physical, human and mechanical registers.<sup>81</sup>

This breakdown of experience, through the shock-encounters of everyday urban life, materialized in such mundane instances as a striking a match, switching on a light, the noise of the industrial machine and hustle of the street all have their psychic counter parts. The internal and external world revealed correspondences that induced reactions in the individual, like "mimetic shock absorbers". Like a smile appearing automatically on a passer-by in the city, "in order to ward off contact"<sup>82</sup>. Buck-Morss defines this compensatory response as anaesthetics.<sup>83</sup> This reaction, to the destruction of traditional experience, and its compensatory effects can be linked to another notion to which Benjamin dedicated considerable space in his writings: the mimetic character. His interest in the corresponding reactions in the human psyche

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ordinary objects of everyday reality as irrational, uncanny, supernatural, or unexpectedly significant. According to Benjamin, Surrealism's ability to disorient and estrange through profane illumination made it a potentially explosive catalyst for social revolution.

<sup>79</sup> This refers universal and public integration of body- and image-space that has become structurally possible through technology.

<sup>80</sup> Walter Benjamin, *One Way Street*, SW1, p. 486

<sup>81</sup> Miriam B. Hansen; Benjamin and Cinema, *Not a One-way Street*, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 25 p. 313

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid*, p. 8

<sup>83</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered*, October 62, pp. 3-41

related to the technological upheaval of modern industrialization connects to his deeper theory of mimetic correspondence. In the mimetic character of the human consciousness resides a connection to the mimetic force in "things":

We start with "similarity". We then try to obtain clarity about the fact that the resemblances we can perceive, for example, in people's faces, in buildings and plant forms, in certain cloud formations, in skin diseases, are nothing more than tiny prospects from a cosmos of similarity. We can go beyond this and attempt to clarify for ourselves the fact that not only are these resemblances imported into things by virtue of chance comparisons on our part, but that all of them (...) are the effects of an active mimetic force working expressly inside things."<sup>84</sup>

This passage reveals how Benjamin saw the mimetic faculty as the capacity to relate to the external world through patterns of similarity, affinity, reciprocity and interaction. Writing within a tradition of reviving the concept of mimesis, he goes beyond the aesthetic per se, and emphasizes a more comprehensive understanding of the concept. Beyond a purely aesthetic analysis<sup>85</sup>, he invokes an understanding of the mimetic as a form of practice that reconfigures the concept within it.

The mimetic faculty in human beings responds to natural patterns of similarity and correspondence. This refers to the "capacity to recognize and produce such correspondences in return"<sup>86</sup>. These correspondences "transcends the traditional subject-object dichotomy and it's technologically exacerbated splitting of experience and agency"<sup>87</sup>; a development we will look at in more detail in relation to discussions on reproductive technologies. The mimetic means "producing similitude". It can be viewed as being both a process, activity, action, and functioning as ritual, performance and play. Miriam Hansen defines it as "a mode of cognition involving sensuous, somatic, and tactile forms of perception; a non-coercive engagement with the other that opens the self to experience, but also, in a darker vein, a rudiment of the formerly powerful compulsion to become and behave like something else".<sup>88</sup> Mimetic cognitive skills have changed over time, "and the gift of producing similarities" have changed with historical development. Mimesis was a component of the "ancient

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<sup>84</sup> W. Benjamin, *On Astrology*, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2, p. 684

<sup>85</sup> Referring to the aesthetic definition of the concept understood more narrowly as pertaining to works of art and standards of verisimilitude.

<sup>86</sup> Miriam B. Hansen; Benjamin, *Cinema and Experience*; "The Blue Flower in the land of Technology", *New German Critique*, no 40, p. 146

<sup>87</sup> S. Buck-Morss, *Aesthetics and Anaesthetics*, p. 30

<sup>88</sup> Miriam B. Hansen; Benjamin and *Cinema*, *Not a One-way Street*, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 25 p. 330

magical correspondences and analogies".<sup>89</sup> The practice whereby the expressive element in objects was brought to speech, human language was itself mimetic and magical in origin. In *On the Mimetic Faculty*, we find a key to how a new relationship to technology can be envisaged. It rests in the idea of decay inherent the mimetic faculty, where in "the perceptual world of modern man contains only minimal residues of the magical correspondences and analogies that were familiar to ancient peoples." Benjamin intends to show that modern man is given a choice as to be "concerned with the decay of this faculty, or with its transformation."<sup>90</sup> Through an alternative utilization of technology, such a transformation is possible.

I will attempt to show that one such transformation of the mimetic faculty can occur through the encounter and response to a technologically altered reality. Through the notion of the "mimetic faculty, and by articulating the increased importance of experience as *Erlebnis* in the modern age, Benjamin develops an aspect of embodied interaction with nature that stands in opposition to the conventional, means-and-ends dominated view of technology. Benjamin's interest and emphasis on the mimetic can therefore be seen as motivated by the possibility of a resurgence of the mimetic potential residing within the modern, alienated and disenchanted world.

The mimetic reflex is a defensive reaction to any technological encounter. As Buck-Morss states: "The dialectical reversal, whereby aesthetic reception changes from a cognitive mode of being "in touch" with reality into a way of blocking out reality, destroys the human organism's power to respond politically, even when self-preservation is at stake."<sup>91</sup> The industrialized labor of 19th and early 20th century created a mode of reaction that "injures every one of the human senses, paralyzing the imagination of the worker." In this way, the individual is "sealed off from experience". Information never enters memory, but instead initiates automated response, and being overwhelmed by the sensory stimuli of fragmentary impressions, "the protective eye sees much - and registers nothing"<sup>92</sup>. Sealed off from experience, the human sensory system is forced to parry technological stimuli to shield both body and psyche from trauma and perceptual shock. This results in a form of reversal of the role of the senses. From functioning as a boundary and a mediator, the human sensory system instead takes on the role of shield. Its function is one of numbing, and

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<sup>89</sup> W. Benjamin, *On Human language, and Language as such*, SW1, p. 67

<sup>90</sup> W. Benjamin, *On the Mimetic Faculty*, *Selected Writings* Vol. 2, p. 721

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, p. 9

repression of memory. The synaesthetic system has become one of anaesthetics.<sup>93</sup> Modern life is imbued with the feeling of numbness as a response to the corresponding overload of sensory information. Thus, the mimetic nature of the nervous system is now characterized as the organizing agent of numbness. Instead of being "in touch" with the world, the human sensory experience is characterized by blocking it out. This over stimulation and numbness within the mimetic capacity of the human sensorium is a direct consequence of the new technological reality.

In this reality, Benjamin sees a new techno-nature that is both the cause and the source of the mimetic capacity's reawakening. The mimetic interaction with the environment will be a main area of inquiry in this paper, as it relates to the way the altered human sensorium interacts with technology through the process defined as innervation.

## **8. War and remembrance**

The First World War plays a central role in Walter Benjamin's later work. Imperialist war, in its highly technological form reverberates many of his writings. In numerous essays and reviews he refers to the omnipresence of destruction in the wake of the Great War, and prophesized the coming of even greater technological destruction. The wars of the future would make the horrors of WWI pale in comparison as the use of technological warfare would eventually create destruction of unimaginable scope.<sup>94</sup> Thus, modernity, in its nature would eventually become a state of "hell". Technology takes on its destructive, life-consuming aspect in the state of war for Benjamin. Technology creates the accumulated productive potential in the latter part of the 19th century, which ultimately also increases the potential for destruction. His commentary on military technology is also the point of departure for his theory of technology in general. One commentator expressed the impact of this war on Benjamin's thought thus; "It is the first world war which provides the traumatic background to Benjamin's culture theory, fascism its ultimate context."<sup>95</sup> In particular, this conflict had definite influence on his thoughts on themes like experience and remembrance. These themes proved central to his overall project of creating an immanent critique of modernism,

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid, p. 8

<sup>93</sup> S. Buck-Morss, *Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered*, October 62, pp. 3-41

<sup>94</sup> Ester Leslie, *Overpowering Conformism*, p. 1

<sup>95</sup> P. Osborne, *The Politics of Time, Modernity and the Avant-Garde*, London, New York 1995, p. 227

and technology in particular. A passage from the 1936 essay "*The Storyteller*" sheds light on how this war redefined Benjamin's perception of modern life after WWI:

...Experience has fallen in value. And it looks as if it may fall into bottomlessness. (...) that our image not only of the external world, but also of the moral world has undergone changes over night, changes that were previously thought impossible. Beginning with the First World War, a process became apparent which continues to this day. Wasn't it noticeable at the end of the war that men who returned from the battlefield had grown silent - not richer but poorer in communicable experience? (...) A generation that had gone to school on horse-drawn streetcars now stood under the open sky in a landscape where nothing remained unchanged but the clouds and, beneath those clouds, in a force field of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny fragile human body.<sup>96</sup>

I choose to quote this passage at length as it contains keys of vital importance to understanding the background for most of Benjamin's later work. This emphasis on the radical upheaval of the First World War remained a source of most of his emphasis on the transformation of experience, modernity, technology and his preoccupation with remembrance and historic materialism. Benjamin refers to the lack of communicable experience of the war veterans to show that much of a sense of experience as tradition has been totally devalued in the experience of the generation of 1914-18 which underwent one of the most monstrous experiences of world history. The crisis of modern experience was for Benjamin closely linked with how the technological progress fundamentally changed post-industrial Europe. This was for him a turning point in the history of humanity, and through this undermined the continuity of tradition and with it traditional experience. Traditional experience for Benjamin was the integrated, narrative meaningful variety (*Erfahrung*). In opposition to this notion of experience, the concept of *Erlebnis* signifies a discontinuous, fragmented experience which was a consequence of the radical upheaval brought forth by the First World War, and its aftermath. Modern experience is permeated by a rationally, fact-oriented communication, which leaves vital aspects of reality mute. In its wake, the modern mindset emphasizes information in favor of narration. This means that there is less room for the storyteller, and the story, which by its nature is told and re-told again and again. In "*The Storyteller*" Benjamin reminds us of the lost art of genuine storytelling which was not simply a function of voice, but needed "that

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<sup>96</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Storyteller*, *Observations on the works of Nikolai Leskov*, SW3, p. 144

old coordination of the soul, the eye and the hand"<sup>97</sup> With the advent of the age of information, the shock of the isolated fact excludes the re-creation of a multi-faceted chain of events which dominates the story. Instead, the fact defies transmission over time since its existence is independent of a narrator.<sup>98</sup> The realm of words and spoken speech is impoverished than the realm of immediacy and the recognition from which it emerged. *Erlebnis* is a way for Benjamin to describe the state of being that modern man is left with as a consequence of the loss of meaning induced by the constant shocks of modern life, and technological warfare in particular. Technology brings forth a central problem for Benjamin: How to transform this shattering of traditional experience, and through it harness its inherent potential for liberating the masses from the domination of capitalism and create a new, classless society?

To grasp technological progress' importance for Benjamin it is necessary to dwell deeper into the time and circumstance into which he developed his theory. The impact of the First World War marks a watershed in the European intellectualism, and from it there evolved conflicting schools of thought in relation to the role, significance and impact of this war on European culture. Benjamin's stance in the debate in the aftermath of the war was one of advocacy of technological destruction of traditional experience, and thus a response to the pressing political situation in which he found himself. In danger of over-simplifying the intellectual context into which Benjamin wrote, a general outline would imply that he found himself in an intellectual "no-man's land". On one side he rejected the cultural conservatives who in turn rejected the technological transformation completely. On the other side of the debate there evolved a right-wing aesthetization of technology, articulated in the late 1920s and early 1930s. In "*The work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*", Benjamin strongly emphasizes the role of the aesthetization of war, and referring to the futurist Marinetti's manifesto for war in Ethiopia he defines war as the "rebellion of technology". Throughout the essay Benjamin presented the possibility of changes in the character of experience leading either to transformation or catastrophe. In the epilogue of the essay, he returns to the 'contemporary mass movements' which have emerged in response to the epoch of technology. One movement is dedicated to transforming all existing structures and identities, while the other attempts to fix the

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid, p. 143

<sup>98</sup> Martin Jay, "Walter Benjamin, Remembrance of the First World War", p. 189.

same by investing them with 'ritual values' and 'aura'

The epilogue begins by evoking the process which manifests itself in the "proletarianisation of modern man and the increasing formation of the masses."<sup>99</sup> Identified as effects of the development of productive forces; these processes embody a dynamic movement. Technology creates their momentum. The discrepancy between the energy unleashed by technology and the structures available for its use will lead to destructive consequences. This is a natural by-product of maladjustment between the development of productive forces and the social structures existing within a bourgeoisie society. Benjamin argues that this development will culminate in an "aestheticisation of politics", which he foresaw at the time of writing the essay in 1935. The reason for this is twofold: Firstly, Fascism, with its "Führer" cult, creates a submission of the masses, and through this submission becomes a work of art, viewing mobilization for war as necessary. Why? Benjamin argues that only war can function as a goal, and a collective locus of attention, while at the same time upholding faith in the traditional property system. Secondly, the production of ritual values becomes the sole focus of technology. This 'violation of the technological apparatus' for the destructive implementation of war is the only way to utilize the entire specter of technological resources while at the same time relying on the property system. These two violations of the technological are fused into a view of technology as 'rebellious' against society:

If the natural utilization of productive forces is impeded by the property system, the increase in technical devices, in speed, and in the sources of energy will press for an unnatural utilization, and this is found in war. (...) Imperialistic war is a rebellion of technology which collects, in the form of 'human material', the claims to which society has denied its natural material.<sup>100</sup>

The conditions for a balance between technology and its social organization have yet to be discovered, although Benjamin hints in this passage, this will require a mutual adaptation of technology and social organization to which no structure or law will be expected. In *The Work of Art* essay, Benjamin explains this technological "rebellion" as a symptom a more comprehensive phenomenon: "the tremendous shattering of

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<sup>99</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, 1935, *Selected writings*, Vol. 3, p.121

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid*, p. 121

tradition which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of humanity."<sup>101</sup>

While not defining technological change as the sole reason for this 'shattering'<sup>102</sup>, his intention was to draw attention to the manner in which human perception is dependent on a mode of experience that is not solely a product of nature but also socio-historical changes. On the same note he explains: "Just as the entire mode of existence of human collectives changes over long historical periods, so too does their mode of perception. The way in which human perception is organized - the medium in which it occurs - is conditioned not only by nature but by history."<sup>103</sup> What happens as a consequence of the historical occurrence of a breakdown of tradition, and with it its mode of perception? Benjamin would argue that at the core of this transformation lays the experience of the "planetary extension of technology", which is transforming the collective and individual human "*Physis*" and with it the character of human experience.<sup>104</sup> With the transformation of experience the opposition between form and content, based fundamentally on the Kantian opposition of subject and object, is no longer justifiable. The extension of the concept of experience into the realm of the technological implies that both the body and *Physis* of human beings and nature are permeated by technological organization. This ongoing process leads to a suspension of the boundaries of the natural body. This is a development that has far reaching consequences both on an individual, human and planetary scale. The separation between man and machine, nature and culture is no longer clearly designated. There is no longer any place beyond technological organization of the body from which to impose form upon content, since both form and content already have become technically organized.

Should we interpret Benjamin's view of war as a 'rebellion of technology' as a rhetorical statement, formulated as a critique of capitalism or does the paragraph hint at something more fundamental in his thinking? In looking at the context in which Benjamin wrote his polemics against the war, and the role of technology in particular, we can approach this question in a more precise manner.

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid, p. 105

<sup>102</sup> In his review of Jünger's War and Warrior anthology, he emphasizes that the macro-economic causes leading up to the First World War should not be overlooked. (Ref. Review by W. Benjamin of "Theories of German Fascism" p. 120.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, p. 105



## 9. War and Warrior; Benjamin's response to Ernst Jünger

In order to contextualize Benjamin's theory of technology, it is important to compare and connect his thinking with those theories of technology that developed around him. With the zeitgeist of the 20s and 30s wartime literature, the most prominent figure may have been Ernst Jünger. While not the only writer Benjamin had in mind<sup>104</sup>, Jünger's work was an important point of departure for his critique of contemporary theories that uncritically heralded the use of technology as unconditional enrichment of human existence. It is beyond the scope of my paper to consider the modernist "conservatives" among Benjamin's contemporaries. However, Jünger exemplifies what I could say was symptomatic for the intellectual currents that Benjamin often strongly opposed. Ernst Jünger, who also proved an important influence on Martin Heidegger's thought, were both consistent with what could be named a "conservative revolution". The essential aspect of this movement was recognition of the fact that underneath the socio-economic structures permeating modern society, there resided a more fundamental yet subtle influence on modernity transcending the causal-material realm. Influenced by Nietzsche, Jünger saw technological progress as manifestations of the eternal Will to Power. Man was but an instrument in the emancipation in this very latest phase of Will to Power. Therefore, technology is nothing essentially mechanical, but merely a facet of this eternal will. Viewing technology not as a consequence of rational forces, but more of an aesthetic phenomenon, as a technological sublime, the realm of the technical becomes a realm manifesting the possibility of transcending "good and evil", as a natural, a-moral force in itself. Socio-economic realities became mere signs of a deeper and eternal play of mythical forces, supernatural and irrational powers. As other reactionary writers of his time, Jünger saw that modernity, and industrial technology in particular could not be seen either in terms of liberal free-market economy or Marxist economic theories. Rather, it needed this deeper or more meta-physical dimension to grasp the subtle transformations of

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<sup>104</sup> Walter Benjamin, "One Way Street", p. 487

<sup>105</sup> One example is Heidegger, who was Benjamin's contemporary and fellow thinker on the subject of technology and modernity. Another was Benjamin's rejection of the Futurist Manifesto. Embodying a radical embrace of aesthetics of technological change, the Italian Futurists is an example of contemporary intellectual movements that Benjamin reacted against. Being one of the movement's most prominent figures, the Italian Emilio Marinetti developed a theory of technology where the emphasis was on a form of social and cultural transcendence made possible by the more abstract reconfiguration of modern life. This implied an attempt at eradicating all forms of bourgeoisie life, and instead building a new mythology, which included the embrace of the potential of new technology to obliterate the past, and also the outmoded ways of the present.

thought permeating the sudden and drastic transformations occurring through industrial and technological progress.

In many aspects of his theory of technology, Benjamin is building a response to the right-wing aestheticisation of technology. Jünger, unlike the conservatives of his time who in the aftermath of WWI railed against technological development, embraced the destruction of the past through technological development. This would pave the way for a new and better mode of existence. In his view, technology has become the ontology of modernity. Anticipating a coming of the age of the Machine, he envisioned a future where man and machine would be merged, creating a new, synthesis of technology and humanity. His writings on WWI are dominated by the aestheticisation of destruction and glorification of war. Within the moment of battle, there emerged a fusion of technology and existential danger that heralded a new, heroic master warrior. His books are marked by a tendency to create symbolic images of a synthesis of nature and machine. Titles such as "*Storms of Steel*" and "*Hurricanes of Fire*" reflect a use of metaphor that reveals a view of nature as a *Physis* in need of mastery. Nature is objectified, and in being thus needs to be subverted. As a response to this way of dichotomizing nature and man, Benjamin attempted to develop a theory in response to Jünger where a reconstitution of a harmonious relationship between technology and nature is emphasized.<sup>106</sup> As a celebration of the incursion of technology into modern life, Jünger also develops the theme of 'danger', as characteristic for the modern urban experience. Through the technological transformation of reality, Man is seen as a new and potentially transformed subject: armored, like a fascist type of cyborg, impervious to pain. The use of technologically induced protection, man can face the death, destruction and horror of war, and through this experience come to terms with his own existence.<sup>107</sup> More importantly, lived experience is allowed to become abstracted into aesthetic experience through technology. Jünger's aesthetics thus becomes aesthetics of and through technology.

In order to grasp this notion of aesthetical experience, it is necessary to look more closely into his idea of a secondary, technologically induced nature. Through his writings, Jünger argues that technology transforms the subjects perception of reality in

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<sup>106</sup> In "To the Planetarium" this attempt is most clearly formulated.

<sup>107</sup> Huyssen, "Fortifying the heart-Totally; Ernst Jünger's armoured texts, *New German Critique*, 59, 3-23, 1993,

such a way that it becomes abstracted, and allows for an objectification of reality. This is possible due to new technologies ability to protect the human subject. It provides an amour that allows the subject to stand in a new, objective relation to the state of affairs, outside the realm of sensation. In this way, the technological armor induces a new possibility for critical analysis, aloof from the suffering and fear of an exposed human subject. The technological protection creates a new possibility for a functional adaptation to the dangers of the modern world. This detachment opens up possibilities for a development of a fusion of technology and Man in the technological warrior. This new way of looking at a synthesis of Man and machine reveals itself most clearly in the way Jünger envisages a reconstitution of vision. The sense of vision is seen as a mode of attack, and materializes in the camera, making photography a new type of weapon.<sup>108</sup> The mechanical eye of a camera makes for a displacement of experience, through freezing the moment in time, and through this process registering the moment in consciousness. In this way, the experience of trauma in war is evaded because conscious perception of the moment is felt through the camera before the real emotional impact of the trauma is felt.<sup>109</sup> Accordingly, the machine creates a displacement of experience, making technology the shield or amour, protecting the individual from traumatization.

Subjective experience occurs for Jünger in a different constitutive frame, when technologically mediated. The shocks of modernity are defended against by the technology that simultaneously allows for enhancement of perception. In this way, technology is creating a new, abstracted mode of experience that neglects or negates the experience of pain. Emotional defense is also technological defense.

Benjamin found himself in a political situation in which a theory of technological destruction was the response. Jünger and other romantics of war believed technology to having a *telos*<sup>110</sup> that rendered the right wing politics victorious. Having this political agenda in mind, Benjamin argued differently. Technology for him unfolded towards a non-instrumental *telos*. In 1930 Benjamin reviewed the collection of essays titled "*War and Warrior*" edited by Ernst Jünger. Here, he identified several problematic issues. The way technology was couched in

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<sup>108</sup> C. Strathausen, The Return of the Gaze, Stereoscopic vision in Jünger and Benjamin, New German Critique, No. 80, 123-148, p. 134

<sup>109</sup> Ibid, p. 136

<sup>110</sup> Teleology (Greek *telos*, "end"; *logos*, "discourse"), in philosophy, the science or doctrine that attempts to explain the universe in terms of ends...

mythical terms and the aesthetic rendering of technological change was for Benjamin a symptom of an idealistically perceived view of nature. The mystery of nature was solved by "a mystical use of technology, rather than using and illuminating the secrets of nature via the detour and organization of human affairs."<sup>111</sup> Despite the effort of Jünger and the other contributors to recapture the alleged communal solidarity of their *fronterlebnins*, Benjamin recognized that the technologically manufactured slaughter of the front was anything but an 'inner experience' worth re-enacting in peacetime. In his review he ferociously denounced the aestheticization of violence and glorification of the 'fascist class warrior' he saw lurking behind the new cult of 'eternal war'. Where Jünger saw beauty, Benjamin saw slaughter and carnage. Indeed, according to Benjamin, the notion of heroism is not enhanced in this First World War, but instead overrun by pure technological warfare's characteristics. This is exemplified by the lack of distinction between civilian and military casualties in gas attacks, rendering international law useless. The war is a cultic war, mythological in nature, recreated to fit idealism where nature and man stands in opposition. In this project Benjamin sees the role of technology as a mediator of a recreated German idealism. Through this idealism Benjamin sees Jünger and his colleagues as using technology to solve the mystery of an idealistically perceived nature. In opposition to the fascist conception of Nature, Benjamin defines Nature as something humans should order their relationship to one another in accordance with. And the ordering principle through which relationship is maintained should be technology.<sup>112</sup>

In this review, Benjamin offers us a view of technology as a force in itself, independent of how it is utilized. In short, the way technology has been used within a capitalist framework has created a discrepancy between how technology is implemented and the potential for social and cultural change it contains. Technological progress under a capitalist and bourgeoisie paradigm creates a recurring problem; modern society was in its beginning overwhelmed by the potential of technology. At the start of his review, Benjamin, quoting Leon Daudet in *Action Française*, equates technology itself with the condition of war:

"L'automobile c'est la guerre". This surprising association of ideas was based on the perception of an increase in technical artifacts, in power sources, and in tempo generally that

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<sup>111</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Theories of German Fascism: On the collection of Essays War and Warrior*, edited by Ernst Jünger. New German Critique, No 17, 1970, pp. 120-128

the private sector can neither absorb completely, nor utilize adequately but that nonetheless demands vindication. But vindication can only occur in antithesis to a harmonious balance, in war, and the destructive power of war provides clear evidence that social reality was not ready to make technology its own organ, and that technology was not strong enough to master the elemental forces of society.<sup>113</sup>

Deeming the way society is coping with the overwhelming power of technological innovation, one of the underlying reasons for war is the 'slave revolt of technology'. What this means is that Benjamin sees the most disastrous aspects of war are partly consequences of "the gaping discrepancy" of the power of technology, and the lack of wisdom in its use. He points to the way bourgeois society takes technology solely into instrumental use, and for its own profit:

Indeed, according to its economic nature, bourgeois society cannot help but insulate everything technological as much as possible from the so-called spiritual, and it cannot help but resolutely exclude technology's right of co-determination in the social order. Any future war will also be a slave revolt of technology.<sup>114</sup>

In short, the response that Benjamin gives to the new reactionary voices of fascist technological idealization reveals several ongoing areas of concern. These themes are rooted in the cultural and political context of the post-war Weimar republic, but would prove to mould his theory of technology to such an extent that they are emblematic to it. They manifest themselves in what can be seen as his précis for his entire philosophy, *To the Planetarium*.

## 10. Communion with a New Nature

When attempting to wrest a coherent argument from Benjamin's texts on war and technology, one text remains almost axiomatic in relation to his later texts on these subjects. As a grand finale of *One Way Street*, *To the Planetarium* (Zum Planetarium) has by some scholars been seen as the synopsis of his entire philosophy.<sup>115</sup> When read, the text cannot but come across as ambiguous. With this text, published in 1928, Benjamin attempts to encapsulate all of history, but as Irving Wohlfarth points out, "a

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid, p. 120-128

<sup>113</sup> Ibid. p. 120

<sup>114</sup> Ibid, p. 120

<sup>115</sup> Notes on the International Walter Benjamin Association First Congress: Amsterdam, July 24-26, 1997, where commentator Irving Wohlfarth made this conclusion.

life's work is certainly contained within it."<sup>116</sup>

In "*To the Planetarium*" Benjamin speaks of Technology as a new *Physis* of body for both humanity and nature. Benjamin did not use the term "New *Physis*" because he meant by it not just industrial technology, but the entire world of matter, among them man, as being transformed by that technology. The subordination of technology to obsolete forms of identity (such as 'nations and families' along with private property and the pursuit of profit) leads to the 'revolt of technology'. This happens as a consequence of technology being forced into unnatural paths by the agendas of bourgeois-capitalist interest. The post-war communist revolutions are described as the first attempt by humanity to bring this new 'body' under control.

This short piece, concluding the "One Way Street" text indicates how Benjamin envisaged the relationship between nature and technology. In short, mankind's ability to relate to the cosmos has gone from the ecstatic and collective, to the detached and private. In antiquity this relationship was one of communion, whereas modern man has lost this immediacy. "...the knowledge of what is nearest to us and what is remotest to us, and never of one without the other."<sup>117</sup> In modern times, our relationship to the cosmos is one where the optical sense is of most importance. The sciences, like modern astronomy, define our experience through the telescopes. Modern man's relationship to the stars is thus typified. Instead, Benjamin states that this relationship should be one of *both* distance and a sense of closeness. By contrast, the destruction of aura, brought on by technology abolishes any sense of distance.<sup>118</sup> To be both distant and close in this context would imply that the more tactile and concrete forms of the ancients, fused the more abstract states of relating to the cosmos through modern technology. The central point for Benjamin is that when the optical sense gains a more prominent role, a more holistic and integrated experience is sacrificed. Yet, if the ancient's practice of communion and being was maintained, this would not necessarily lead to the one-sided emphasis on the visual or the optic. The way this could be done is by maintaining them through resonating sufficiently with the modern technologies.

Through technological destruction of traditional experience, this relationship

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<sup>116</sup> Irving Wohlfarth, *The Idea of a Technological Eros*, Walter Benjamin, *Language, Literature, History*, p. 112

<sup>117</sup> W. Benjamin, *One Way Street*, SW1, p. 486

<sup>118</sup> This became a vital aspect of his theory of art in his *Artwork Essay*, of which we will go into in more depth later.

is dominated by a need for mastery, instead of communion. I read the below as a key passage in understanding Benjamin's later writings, and what kind of "second nature" technology manifests. He underlines the danger of modern man to label ancient ways of relating to nature and the cosmos as unimportant, reduced to an individual poetic experience:

It is not. It's hour strikes again and again, and then neither nations nor generations can escape it, as was terribly clear by the last war, which was an attempt at new and unprecedented commingling with the cosmic powers. Human multitudes, gases, electrical forces were hurdled into the open country, high-frequency currents coursed through the landscape, new constellations rose in the sky, aerial space and ocean depths thundered with propellers, and everywhere sacrificial shafts were dug into mother earth. This immense wooing of the cosmos was enacted for the first time on a planetary scale that is in the spirit of technology.<sup>119</sup>

This passage signifies what Benjamin saw as a direct consequence of the rejection of human cosmic consciousness. He warns us not to disregard our prior relationship to the cosmos, since it will return in a potential destructive way, in the form of technologically engendered destruction on a massive scale, like the First World War. It is important to mark that Benjamin's line of reasoning about the fate of techno-warfare has clear affinities towards orthodox communism. The argument of the text can be reduced to the relation between new forces of production, that blast open old relations of production. During the diverting of this force from its original goal, the dammed up production forces find unwholesome reactionary paths of expression, resulting in imperialist warfare.<sup>120</sup> With war Benjamin sees the vain "attempt of a new and unprecedented commingling with the cosmos".<sup>121</sup> Instead of following this path towards destruction, Benjamin envisioned a revolution where the proletariat takes over as the master of the productive forces. In this prospect, the Messianic aspect, fused unconventionally with the Marxist influence of his writings is of central importance. A theme which dominated his thought in the 20s and 30s and a theme which manifests itself within the closing lines of the text, when stating the way revolution would redeem, and resuscitate the corrupted new "body" of technology: "The power of the proletariat is the measure of its convalescence".<sup>122</sup> The uprisings

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid, p.104

<sup>120</sup> I. Wohlfarth, *The Idea of a Technological Eros*, p.117

<sup>121</sup> W. Benjamin, *One Way Street, To the Planetarium*, SW1, p. 486

<sup>122</sup> W. Benjamin, *One Way Street*, SW1, p. 487

in the aftermath of WWI may have failed, but something was gained still. Within the countermovement, the slave revolt of technology was wrestled from the imperialists, showing the potential for a liberated future. Technology could be used for creating a better life for the masses, rather than forcing them to submission under the productive forces of capitalism.

Drawing on such influences as Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Freud in particular, this text gives a grim diagnosis of the First World War as a symptom of European nihilism.<sup>123</sup> The reality of war permeates the text, and reveals what radical upheaval the massive technological destruction leaves in its wake. The capacity for total and mutual annihilation exhibits the power of technology to end all wars, but at the same time to end all life. Only through channeling this power down constructive paths can this end be averted. These polarities, destruction and creative, revolutionary overcoming have clear Freudian connotations; “Living substance conquers the frenzy of destruction only in the ecstasy of procreation”<sup>124</sup>. The “death-drive” is seen by Freud to be standing in mutual conflict and dependence of the “sex-drive”, or rather “*Thanatos*” and “*Eros*”. Wohlfarth has pointed out that in “*Unbehagen in der Kultur*”, and indirectly in *To the Planetarium*, the world is a stage for the eternal battle of *Eros* and *Thanatos*.<sup>125</sup> In Benjamin’s case, the concluding sentence quoted above reveals not only a affirmation of the creation of life over destruction, but also a “conquering” that entails affirmative action that counters and overcomes destruction in a moment of “ecstasy” (Rauch). Thus, not only does Benjamin fuse the Nietzschean will to power with Freud, but also the revolutionary power of Marxism is combined with the hope for a Messianistic moment of redemption. The text starts as follows:

If one had to expound the teachings of antiquity with the utmost brevity while standing on one leg, as did Hillel that of the Jews, it could only be in this sentence: “They alone shall possess the earth who live from the powers of the cosmos.”<sup>126</sup>

As such the opening and the ending sentences of the text induce Messianic perspectives in juxtaposition with the eternal battle of *Thanatos* and *Eros*.<sup>127</sup> In

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<sup>123</sup> I. Wohlfarth, *The Idea of a Technological Eros* p. 115

<sup>124</sup> W. Benjamin, *One Way Street*, SW1, p. 487

<sup>125</sup> I. Wohlfarth, *The Idea of a Technological Eros* p. 115

<sup>126</sup> W. Benjamin, *One Way Street*, SW1, p. 486

<sup>127</sup> The dialectical relationship between destructive and creative forces would emerge in many dimensions of Benjamin’s later thought. See *On the Destructive Character* (SW2, p 541) in where destruction is a prerequisite of creating, in “making room” for creative action through clearing away



denying the aspects of human consciousness that seeks communion with what is larger than man, Benjamin foresaw that these impulses will return, in a perverted state, which within modernity results in total war. As such, Benjamin can here be seen as attempting to wrest the creative potential in the perverted state of war and channel into the Eros of creative potential. But how does Benjamin envisage this return to a collective communion, after the neglected impulses of mankind is saved from running towards destruction. And in what way can the ancient cosmic interaction be found within a technological life world? One way is for Benjamin to try to savor traces of the old within the new: In being both distant and close, the ancient's concrete and direct way of being would bind the modern abstract modes of relating with the cosmos through modern technological means.

Throughout Benjamin's work, the potential of savoring the prior modes of being within the modern, so that these were maintained through and alongside the technological modes were stressed. When technology instead is used as the instrument to 'enact the cosmic experience', as proclaimed by Jünger (and Marinetti), experience of the cosmos withdraws, and instead becomes lost in instrumental ends. The mastery of nature through technology is for Benjamin a sidetrack, leading to disastrous results. Modern man has a narrow and limited concept of nature, and its extension is grossly limited to that of the genuine cosmic experience. This new '*Physis*' that technology has become entails a new way of relating to nature. It need not be an instrument of power and submission. Instead, there resides endless potential within these new forms to re-establish a contact with the cosmos and 'bring this new body under control'.

Benjamin implies that through a balanced and integrated use, technology will not attempt to master nature, but instead try to master the relation between man and nature. At stake is the regulating function that technology entails when facing the relationship between man, as producers, and nature:

Mastery of nature, so the imperialists teach us, is the purpose of all technology. But who would trust a martinet that declared that the control of children by adults is the purpose of education? Is not the education above all the indispensable regulation of the relationship between generations and therefore mastery, if we are to use this term, of that relationship and not that of children? And likewise technology is not the mastery of nature but of the relation

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decaying forms of life.

This emphasis on regulation, as a two-way process permeates Benjamin's work as he attempts to sketch out alternative ways of harnessing technology's potential. Rather than imposing control over nature itself, the interrelations of man and nature are to be regulated. *To the Planetarium* indicates a profound transformation in the way humans perceive and relate to the object world. This transformation was actualized by social change, and realized and made a necessity by technological development. Through it, the proletariat, as the revolutionary subject can regain control over the productive forces. Thus the concluding sentence of the text may be interpreted as referring to the uprisings in the wake of WWI, and finally culminating with the Russian Revolution in 1917. The power wrested from the technological destruction of the war was momentarily taken out of the hands of the imperialists, and harnesses as medium for freedom for the collective. But is this all that is contained within this enigmatic text?

The city is increasingly the technological site of human habitation. The site where the collision of technology and human tradition is most marked. It is also here that the misuses of technological progress come most visible. The misuses of technology have two major reasons according to Benjamin: Firstly, the distorted use of technology under capitalism, which mainly serves the ruling class. Secondly, the way technology maintains the perverted relation to nature, which means the way technology is implemented. Instead of letting man give himself over to cosmic communion, technology is used as a tool of mastery. In fact, the structures of modern civilization entail on a fundamental level a basic intention of submission of nature, and often a violent one. This is evident not only in engineering and through weapons of mass destruction, but as a way of being. Nature is endowed with characteristics which reveal the mythological mode of thinking. As such, instead of purging reality of myth, the idea of mastery exhibits a mythological thinking originating in the collective unconscious. In 'conquering' and 'harnessing' the forces of nature, an underlying conceptual worldview is revealed. A view submerged in myth. Citing Simmel, Benjamin points the finger at a terminology that exhibits rationality and sober empirical foundations, but discloses it's direct opposite:

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid, p. 103

On the bungled reception of technology: 'The illusions in this sphere are reflected quite clearly in the terminology that is used in it, and in which a mode of thinking, proud of its...freedom from myth, discloses the direct opposite of these features. To think that we conquer or control nature is a very childish supposition, since ...all notions of... conquest and subjugation have a proper meaning only of an opposing will has been broken.(...)it does show that the mythological mode of thought is also at home within the scientific world view'<sup>129</sup>

Domination of nature becomes paradigmatic to the modern consciousness. In relating to nature, modern man is creating a relationship of means and ends, where direct experience of the non-human has no place as valuable in-itself. The result is that "technology has betrayed humankind and transformed the bridal bed to a bloodbath". Instead, a more integrating use of technology would be to master the relationship of man and nature. How this 'authentic' experience of cosmos could be recreated implies a relationship between man, technology and nature not based on domination. This relationship is dependent on Benjamin's concept of aura, and the discontinuation of the belief in progress.

## **11. Progress: A One Way Street**

Paradigmatic to Benjamin's theory of technology is the fundamental critique he launches on the faith in progress. Modernity is by and large a consequence of the chain of success that followed from the age of enlightenment and it's freeing of the sciences from the fetters of tradition and religion. Within Benjamin's writings resides a basic and essential mistrust in modern man's tenuous belief in 'progress', and also that progress is coincidental with improving the quality of life for mankind per se. *One Way Street* presents the anti-bourgeoisie revolution as a counter-force to the technological and economical development leading up to the First World War, and signified a shattering of a legacy of thousands of years. Irving Wohlfarth argues that Benjamin conceived revolution as accelerating the dialectic of historical progress and as pulling its emergency cord<sup>130</sup>, vaguely insinuating revolutions as the crucial point in human history where the winds of progress are silenced.

To further grasp Benjamin's theory of technology we need to look closer into this basic critique of the mythological character that technological development is

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<sup>129</sup> W. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, X7a,1 p. 662

<sup>130</sup> I. Wohlfarth, *On the Messianic Structure of Benjamin's Last Reflections*, Glymph 3, Baltimore 1978, p. 168

granted within modernity; based on the idea that technology is itself able to improve the human social and moral condition. In the powers harnessed by technology from utilizing the natural resources, modern capitalist society envisages a future of growth and prosperity. *To the Planetarium* shows how a socialist revolution could potentially harness the positive aspects of this development. Benjamin remains suspicious towards the socialists of his day, who remained keenly focused on following the movement of material progress in hope of an emancipated society. Benjamin was aware that without a revolutionary interruption of technological progress under capitalism, the future of man would be threatened. In spite of the obvious advantages within technological progress, Benjamin was keen to point the finger at the various ways capitalist industrial 'progress' had produced considerable social 'regression'. Modernist urban life was in this respect a site of increasing social unrest and inequality; instead of being a medium for creating a technological utopia, it manifested the qualities August Strindberg defined as 'hell'.<sup>131</sup> The advent of the Third Reich and the Second World War would soon provide empirical evidence for this profane version of hell, realized with the use new technological tools.

Throughout *One Way Street* Benjamin shows how relations to nature and to other humans are given limited expression by the commodity form of money, a key symptom of which is the subordination of technology to profit. His subsequent work on the experience of the city criticizes the relationship between commodification and technology, showing how the possibility of a new experience of space and time opened up by technology is reduced by the commodity form.<sup>132</sup> As a consequence, the liberating potential residing within new technological forms is retained within the bourgeois interest of controlling technology for profit, and by this maintaining the power-structures of mastery, both in relation to the proletariat, and nature. In contrast, the authentic experience of the cosmos explicated in *To the Planetarium*, points towards a redefined relationship between man, technology and nature. This relationship could only be established through and because of embracing the revolutionary powers inherent in technology itself.

With history being dictated by the ruling class, technology and scientific rationality accumulates a self-evident role as truth-references. In the essay *Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian* (1937), Benjamin returns to reveal the underlying

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<sup>131</sup> W. Benjamin, Central Park, New German Critique, No. 34, p. 50

<sup>132</sup> H. Caygill, Walter Benjamin, The Colour of Experience, p. 119

self-evident role of technology and science within modernity:

But technology is not purely a scientific phenomenon. It is also a historical one. As such it forces us to investigate the positivist and undialectical separation between the natural sciences and the humanities. The questions which mankind asks of nature are determined among other things by its level of production. This is the point where positivism breaks down. In the development of technology, it saw only the progress of science, not the retrogression of society. It overlooked the fact that capitalism has decisively conditioned that development. It also escaped the positivists among the theoreticians of Social Democracy that the development of technology made it more and more difficult for the proletariat to take possession of it ... They failed to perceive the destructive side of technology because they were alienated from the destructive side of dialectic.<sup>133</sup>

By developing the line of reasoning that highlights the link between the apparent self-evident facticity of science and technology, and its lurking rejection of the obvious discrepancies of vision and reality, Benjamin begins his redeeming and revolutionary project. In revealing the lack of recognition of the inherent destructive character of scientific and technological progress, he believes that society will encounter its alienation by entering into social unrest and upheaval. The collective consciousness will re-emerge with a vengeful streak, and modern culture must face its rejected, and defected sides:

This set the trend of the last century; the defective reception of technology. It consisted in a series of vigorous and repeated attempts to get around the fact that technology serves this society solely for the production of commodities...<sup>134</sup>

Through the last century's tendencies towards technological romanticism, society was totally devoid of any recognition of the actual experience of the development of the productive forces. Without this type of knowledge, the consequences of a technological development motivated purely by the capitalist interest become unchecked:

It is discovering that traffic speeds, like the capacity to duplicate both the spoken and the written word, have outstripped human needs. The energies that technology develops beyond their threshold are destructive. They serve primarily to foster the technology of warfare, and of means used to prepare public opinion for war. It may be said of this development, which was

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<sup>133</sup> W. Benjamin, Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian, SW3 p. 267

thoroughly class-determined, that it occurred behind the back of the last century-which was not yet aware of the destructive energies of technology.<sup>135</sup>

Technology in its capitalist utilization makes use of the worker, and factory machinery gives this transposition a technically concrete form. Machines arrange reality around them in such a way that humans become adjuncts to the machine. Industrial labor, through its formation within the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century confirms Benjamin's notion that technology has "assaulted the human body". In addition, the human sensorium had undergone a conditioning in encountering with technology. In his entries in the *Passagen-werk* on Charles Baudelaire, Benjamin extends his anthropology of industrialized modernity by introducing the category of shock, and also the decline of the aura. Here Benjamin defines the chief sources of the decline of aura in the capitalist technologies of mass production: "Mass production is the principal cause – and class warfare the principal social cause – of the decline of the aura."<sup>136</sup>

Capitalist utilization of technology is based on producing commodities. Commodity production depends on the logic of obsolescence, which means that an economic system reproduces itself and its products while giving the surface impression of producing novelty and paving the way for progress. But the hidden reality of this system is its monotonous rhythm of production, which is based on fixed structures of productions relations. Benjamin named this capitalist production cycle after Nietzsche's concept of "eternal return". What is produced and deemed "new" is simultaneously marked by the unconscious knowledge that there is nothing new to come, due to the fact that the current economic system of production relations remains the same. The debilitating nature of eternal return means that "life under the influence of eternal return guarantees an existence that does not emerge from the auratic".<sup>137</sup> This existence, where repetition conceals the bleakness of a capitalist culture permeated by alienation, is symptomatic to the decay of the aura. From this vantage point, Benjamin seeks to define modernity as dialectically opposite to the ancient relationship of cosmic communion. But it is exactly due to this decay or absence of the auratic that a renewed collective relationship with the cosmos is possible, through

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid, p. 276

<sup>135</sup> Ibid, p. 267

<sup>136</sup> W. Benjamin, Arcades Project, J64a,1, p. 343

<sup>137</sup> Ibid, D10a,1, p. 119

the very technology that has been utilized to suppress the masses. Through technology mankind is forced to alter his conditioned perception of reality, which in turn transforms his relation to nature. How then does Benjamin envisage this new relationship to come about? The answer may be connected with his conception of aura, and innervation, or as we will discuss below, two different types of auratic experience.

## 12. Aura, Aesthetics and War

What then can be said of the way technology changes our perception of reality? Taking all the above dimensions of this question into consideration, Benjamin sees technological upheaval within modernity as manifesting itself within the role of art. Seen as arguably the most influential of his essays *The Work of Art in the Epoch of its Technical Reproducibility* takes up many of the theoretical strands from *One Way Street*. The “tremendous shattering of tradition which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of humanity”<sup>138</sup> brought on by technology can be traced back to *Zum Planetarium*. At its core this radical change signals an experience of the global emergence of technology, or the growing synthesis of *Techne* and *Physis* as such. To paraphrase from *To the Planetarium*; this change is the transformation of the collective and individual *Physis* and with it the character of human experience.<sup>139</sup> Through technology a new *Physis* is being born through which a new contact with the cosmic forces emerges. As mentioned earlier, one consequence of this transformation is that there is no “beyond” the technological. The *Physis* of man and nature is already permeated by the technical; the separation of form and content becomes irrelevant. Modernity is marked by this dissolution of these boundaries, and through it the dissolution of the traditional concept of art. Benjamin sees this not as a loss but a possibility of grounding a new notion of art rooted in the technological. Here Benjamin makes a crucial distinction between art as accepting the boundaries and limits of the reproductive technologies at a given point in time, and realizing the transformative and redemptive potential within these technologies. This vital distinction is intimately related to how mankind’s interaction with technology can be mimetic and liberating, instead of reactive and alienating. In the essay, this liberating potential is closely related to the technologies of photography, mass media and film in

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<sup>138</sup> W. Benjamin, Artwork Essay, SW3, p. 104

particular. Here the text is faithful to the manifest of *One Way Street*, where technology's role is not one of mastery, but instead of regulating the relationship between man and nature. In this light, film's social function is seen by Benjamin to establish equilibrium between man and machine.<sup>140</sup> According to his remarks in *The Work of Art* essay, technical reproducibility reverses the social function of the work because the work of art no longer finds its uniqueness expressed in ritual. When this uniqueness is lost, it corresponds to the loss of what could be deemed the "aura" of the artwork. What constitutes this auratic dimension, or rather, what makes this concept central to our understanding of the role of technology in Benjamin's work? The uniqueness of aura is defined in the essay when the auratic character of a work of art is compared to the aura of a *natural* object. In the latter case, the aura is attributed to what Benjamin deems as the "unique appearance of distance"<sup>141</sup>. When objects have aura, they retain a fetishistic quality that generates a sense of authority or reverence. Aura comes therefore to legitimize the continuation of traditional social functions, together with preserving the status quo of present social structures. As a response to the "barbarism" of the rising fascist cult, Benjamin sought to recover a previous form of auratic experience not related to art, or objects, but *natural* objects. The Jüngerian, Fascist embrace of "auratic" experience and objects needed to be countered with a return to a former collective communal form of auratic experience.

Relevant to our discussion is the realization that Benjamin brought forth in *To the Planetarium*: Through the ecstatic communion with the cosmos was one of trance (Rausch), and only through this altered state of perception can man "gain knowledge of what is nearest to us and what is remotest from us, and never the one without the other."<sup>142</sup> Thus, there is a genuine trace of auratic experience that needs to be redeemed for mankind to have renewed communion with the cosmos. Within the technological shattering of tradition, renewal of humanity is dependent on re-discovering the source of the natural auratic experience. Tradition binds experience to set patterns manifested in the aura of an object. Benjamin could be interpreted to advocate an abandonment of the older traditional ways of experience, due to their auratic character. Because of their close relationship to the system of domination they are a part of, and sustains through their existence, these old forms of experience

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<sup>139</sup> W. Benjamin. *One Way Street*, SW1 p. 486-87

<sup>140</sup> W. Benjamin, *Art in the Age of Technical Reproducibility*, SW2, p. 117

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid*, p. 105



should be discarded to make space for a new and revolutionary way of experience. But this is not sufficient for creating a dialectical image of history, as the past is not something lost, or set, but (changeable) and source of vital cultural heritage. Much of Benjamin's work is pointing to another alternative project, namely that of reclaiming forms of experience that is threatened by capitalist modernity and technological progress. The shattering of tradition can instead become a necessary and essential occurrence in the attempt to reclaim aspects the ancient's heritage. Benjamin links between the aura and redemption, claiming that the decay of aura and the weakened ability to envision a better future are one and the same. It is important to note the difference he described between the ancient and modern way of experience in *One Way Street*, and how this affected man's view of nature and cosmos. The modern world is governed by an instrumentalist and discursive mode of experiencing, in contrast with the ancient way, marked not by communicative knowledge, but mystical, or even magical communion. But this does not mean that the auratic experience is permeated by mystical-religious undercurrents. The auratic for Benjamin is much too ambivalent concept to entail such references. Instead his first definition of the aura is an experience of natural surroundings: We define the aura as the unique appearance [*Erscheinung*] of a distance, however close it may be. Resting on a summer afternoon and letting one's gaze follow a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow on one - that means breathing the aura of those mountains, that branch"<sup>143</sup> The impersonal, yet subjective mode of perception relates at it's origin to natural objects, yet since our modes of perceiving the world are historically contingent, and dependent on historical change, this mode of perception is inherently in change. But the new technologically altered perception of modernity could potentially include a positive, original form of aura. In nature, the genuine, original auratic experience could be found.

In the epilogue of the essay, Benjamin again returns to the issue of war, and technological destruction. He returns to his contemporary mass movements which have emerged in response to the epoch of technology. One such movement is dedicated to transforming all existing structures and identities, while the other seeks similar ends by different means; investing them with "ritual values" and aura. The epilogue starts by describing the process in which "the proletarianisation of modern

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<sup>142</sup> W. Benjamin, *One Way Street*, SW1 p. 486

<sup>143</sup> W. Benjamin, *A Little History of Photography*, SW 2, p. 518

man and the increasing formation of the masses" is invoked.<sup>144</sup> This process gains its momentum through the ever increasing influence of technology, and the effects of the development of the productive forces. If the social structure does not align itself to these productive forces, this misalignment will ultimately tend towards a destructive outcome. This outcome or "solution" is defined by Benjamin as manifested in two diametrical opposite outcomes, which both include the introduction of aesthetics into politics. The first is diagnosed as the "violation of the masses, whom Fascism, with its *Führer* cult, forces to their knees", creating a work of art out of society itself. Society is submerged in mass-auratic aesthetic project that culminates in mobilization for war, and its own downfall. Benjamin states that only war on a grand scale can set a goal for mass movements while at the same time maintaining the traditional property system. The second outcome is marked by the violation of a technology that is utilized solely for the production of "ritual values". When technology is brought under submission by the capitalist framework, the final consequence is again war, as this is "the only way to mobilize all of today's technical resources while maintaining the property system."<sup>145</sup> These two violations or "solutions" are the direct consequence of unnatural utilization of technology, whose natural utilization is impeded by the capitalist property system. The unnatural utilization will culminate in war:

The destructiveness of war furnishes proof that society has not been mature enough to incorporate technology as its organ, that technology has not been sufficiently developed to cope with the elemental forces of society.<sup>146</sup>

This passage above runs reflects his more grandiose diagnosis of the way war is a symptom of imbalance in the relation between mankind, or society, nature and technology found in *To the Planetarium*. This reestablishment of balance is yet to be found within existing social structures, and political systems, and Benjamin hints at a need for a different mode of perception into which mankind can organize their relation to nature and technology.

Art and aesthetic utilization of technology is one potential point of experimentation for a future balancing of technological and human forces. The developmental potential of film technology was for Benjamin a new realm that could

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<sup>144</sup> W. Benjamin, *Artwork Essay*, p. 121

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid*, p 124

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid*, p. 121

prove a fertile soil for a possible cathartic discharge of the tensions produced by the surging development of productive forces and the alienation of modern life. Another potential and conceivable future is that of warfare. Being marked by his polemic against the Jüngerian ethos of techno-warriors, he sees a potential future in which warfare is able "to supply the artistic gratification of a sense perception that has been changed by technology".<sup>147</sup> The shattering of traditional experience brings with it a new mode of perception, and with it, the way mankind responds to this change. Benjamin draws on his conception of how the destruction of traditional experience forces modern man into nihilism. Drawing on the concept from Nietzsche, he defines this reaction as either active or passive. One response is the passive nihilist appeal to aura in creating a new aesthetic distance where the transformation of experience could be maintained and denied within existing structures. However, the active nihilist would respond by revolution. The energies of war could through revolution be redirected into creative and constructive pathways. Thus, the situation in which modern European society found itself after the First World War was one of necessity of choice<sup>148</sup>. Choosing passive or active nihilist solutions "is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art."<sup>149</sup> Benjamin saw the October Revolution of 1917 in terms of a "first attempt of mankind to bring the new *Physis* under control."<sup>150</sup>

### 13. Aura and Freedom

In his middle and later period of production, Benjamin attempts to redeem a form of auratic experience for a historical and materialist practice. In addition to the Artwork essay, relevant text are his essays on Surrealism, on photography, his texts on mimesis; works on Proust, Kafka, Leskov and Baudelaire, certain passages in the Arcades project, and his texts on experiments with hashish. All these texts are percolated by his attempts to construct a theory of experience where the notion of aura plays a central role. The diagnosis of the passive nihilist strand of thought as infused with auratic distance towards the experience of shock is not meant to imply that dimensions of auratic experience is detrimental. Instead, there resides unprecedented

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid, p.122

<sup>148</sup> Caygill, *The Colour of Experience*, p. 117

<sup>149</sup> W. Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Reproducibility*, SW3, p. 122

<sup>150</sup> W. Benjamin, *One Way Street*, SW1, p. 487

potential of new possible futures within auratic experience. This prevents us from taking a partial reading of Benjamin, and his theory of technological destruction of tradition. Being able to revive the genuine traces of aura, the false traces can be welcomed as an integral part of his utopian project. The genuine trace of aura contains the possible solution to Benjamin's unsolved problem: How to develop a theory of technology that retains the ethical inter-subjective qualities of aura, without its repressive aspects. Where this solution points can only be hinted to, and the passages of the Artwork essay, and other texts gives but vague pointers in a general direction as to how Benjamin would treat such a solution. Historically speaking, the auratic experience changes with every new generation. In modernity, it changes in the encounter with technology. Therefore, the genuine trace of aura is to be re-discovered, and not re-invented in a post-industrial world. But where is this genuine trace to be found? Here, Benjamin searches in unorthodox places, and finds it in the gaze of the child. Every childhood contains within it the seed of a new genuine auratic experience:

Only a thoughtless observer can deny that correspondences come into play between the world of modern technology and the archaic symbol-world of mythology. Of course, initially the technologically new seems nothing more than that. But in the very next childhood achieves something great and irreplaceable for humanity. By the interest it takes in technological phenomena, by the curiosity it displays before any sort of invention or machinery, every childhood binds the accomplishments of technology to the old worlds of symbols. (...)It takes form not in the aura of novelty, but in the aura of the habitual. In memory, childhood and dream.<sup>151</sup>

The world of myth is seen not as a repressive force that hinders the liberation of the individual, but instead a sign that the genuine trace is created within every childhood's way of integrating technology, or "the new" as something integrated in the surface of experience, and something natural and part of the constitutive surroundings, not as the aura of novelty (false) but as the aura of habit (genuine). Within the habitual play of the child, Benjamin also recovers something else: a deep connection to the ancient practice of mimesis, or mimetic interaction with nature. This connection will have important implications to how Benjamin attempts to resolve the crux of technology.

To understand what Benjamin means, his conception of "natural" needs to be

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<sup>151</sup> W. Benjamin, Arcades Project, N2a,1, p. 461

taken into account. Instead of having a view of nature a pure, and pristine, Benjamin sees nature as produced, mediated and reformed by human hands. The way labor is organized needs to take this into account. Instead of being based on necessity, labor should be modeled after the way children interact with the environment. This signifies a true revolution in relation to technology. Labor must turn into play. Benjamin thus revives old utopian and Marxian thoughts, where the conception of work as a form of self-realization.<sup>152</sup> Thus, a labor able to model children's play is not oriented towards production of exchange values, but towards interaction and improvement on nature. Thus, technological play is the opposite of mastery over nature, and instead emerges from the understanding of humans as part of nature.

Unraveling Benjamin's notion of aura ensures that an essential place must be reserved for conserving forms of experience deemed auratic. The dilemma of technology resides in the way all forms of experience becomes engulfed and subsumed within its domain. It is tempting to draw a line of comparison to our present day virtual reality of Cyberspace which to some degree subsumes actual reality under it's realm of premises. There is less and less personal contact, as the technological reality of the World Wide Web becomes self-evident representative of effective agency. This makes for a misplacement of the normative grounds by means of which auratic experience could be significant. For Benjamin this process is evident in the concept of *Phantasmagoria*, and in the increase of 'shock'; concepts that yields access both to false and authentic traces of aura.

## 14. Experience and Shock

There is a neurological basis to the understanding Benjamin has of modern experience. It has it's origins in the concept of shock. This Freudian insight contains the idea that consciousness is a shield which protects the organism against stimuli. Through preventing their impact or impress on memory, consciousness is able to ward off "excessive energies" by isolating present consciousness from memory.<sup>153</sup>

Notwithstanding the extreme dimension of war, Benjamin views the impact of shock to have progressively established itself as the norm of modern-day existence. Beginning with the First World War a process became apparent which continues to

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<sup>152</sup> E. Leslie, *Overpowering Conformism*, p. 177

<sup>153</sup> S. Buck-Morss, *Aesthetics and Anaesthetics*, p. 16

this day. Seeking to explore the phenomenon, he turns to Marcel Proust<sup>154</sup>, and his outline of the difference between voluntary and involuntary memory. Being able to recall information about the past at will without ever retaining any trace of it, voluntary memory functions like "conventional memory". Involuntary memory, on the other hand, eludes attempts by the conscious mind to conjure up the past. It is through this dimension of memory that the genuine, "objective" traces of the past have an opportunity to emerge. By being triggered by chance encounters with objects, it can activate or trigger responses that are associated with a memory stored in conjunction with this response. In short, the response to the object or stimuli activates a dormant link to an already forgotten memory.

Benjamin actually claims shock to be *the* central modern experience. The human organism is exposed to a technologically altered environment that exposes the sensory system to an overload of information. The city itself is a cauldron of shock-effects and to an extent leaves the individual overpowered. The Lunapark fairground is the site of modern "cosmic" *Erfahrung* in *To the Planetarium*. Benjamin described this as the place where workers become familiar with, or conditioned to, the reality of factory labor. The optical sense, together with tactility is submerged in the overwhelming impressions of urbanity. The traffic, the all-pervasive advertisements, newspapers all form a sort of assault on the physical sensorium of the human body. The overwhelming impressions induce the state of psychic shocks, and they are met with countermeasures from the psyche in form of unconscious defense mechanisms. Using ideas from *Freud's Jenseits des Lustprinzips*, Benjamin defines shock as a reaction of necessity. Consciousness forms a psychic shield that wards off the stimuli that is deemed harmful to the organism. Benjamin builds further on this Freudian notion, and defines the experience of 'shock' as a mechanical response and not only personal.<sup>155</sup> This elaboration of the Freudian theory does not make modern man into an automaton, but instead creates an instrumentalist, mechanical way of relating to the surrounding environment. This total reconstituting way of interaction with the environment shapes modern man in two ways. On one hand it creates a defense system which filters the unwanted stimulus. On the other hand it inhibits the assimilation of sense impression into actual experience. The urban life-world creates habitual, monotone patterns of behavior, and a narrowing of attention, resulting in a

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<sup>154</sup> W. Benjamin, On the Image of Proust, SW2, p. 237-247

<sup>155</sup> E. Leslie, Overpowering Conformism, p. 183

well-functioning urban individual. But as a consequence, the individual is left without a reality where he assimilates his surroundings into *Erfahrung*. There is no way of letting the urban world becoming totally integrated within the individual's experiential field. Instead, *Erlebnis* dominates the individual's mode of being, responding to shocks by blocking out experiences. In this way the involuntary memory is never accessed, and a possibility of recovering sources of a larger field of Experience is lost. It impoverishes man's ability of remembrance, since perception becomes experience only when it connects with sense-memories in the past.<sup>156</sup> Consequently, through *Erlebnis* the individual experiences reality as a series of shocks. It becomes a reality of disruption instead of continuity. Technologically dominated surroundings create a world whose overwhelming character is not acknowledged consciously, but instead purely lived 'through' without any concrete assimilation of the experiences that one is faced with. This creates the shallow character of the technological environment. Experience is functioning only superficially, unable to assimilate data through personal experience. Where in the nineteenth century *Erlebnis* was the realm of the adventurer, in Benjamin's own time it appears as Fate.

In Fate is concealed the concept of the "total experience" that is fatal from the outset. War is its unsurpassed prefiguration. ("I am born German; it is for this I die"- the trauma of birth already contains the shock that is mortal. This coincidence (...) defines "fate".)<sup>157</sup>

As shock permeates the everyday life of the individual, the state of numbness accompanies it. This numbness or anaesthetics of modernity becomes part of the psychic constitution. Numbness pervades when shock is repeated to such an extent that it takes on normality. In shielding the blows of industrialism, insensibility creeps in. Man transforms into an automaton, displaying alertness, and at the same time lack of emotional engagement. Numbness induces a mode of existence that creates "deadly armatures, scaffolds, machines for work"<sup>158</sup>, and pushes mankind into the remotest distance of genuine, engaged interaction with fellow men. A long way from a harmonious mimetic interaction with the cosmos declared in *To the Planetarium*.

Through its reproductive capacity, and its ability to bring things in close vicinity, technology creates a decrease in voluntary memory. In accordance with

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<sup>156</sup> W. Benjamin, *The Storyteller*, SW3, p. 154

<sup>157</sup> W. Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, Konvolut m, m1a,4, p. 801

<sup>158</sup> E. Leslie, *Overpowering Conformism*, p. 183

Freud, this development weakened the connections between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*; "To experience means to master an impression inwardly that was so strong we could not grasp it at once." This definition of experience in Freud's sense is something very different from what is meant by those who speak of having 'had an experience'.<sup>159</sup> Representing a richer, more complex and deeper state of experience, *Erfahrung* is lost when technological progress creates an everyday world where everything is drawn closer, and in this way technology transforms the closeness already existing in relations, due to its nature of bringing close and at the same time creating a distance or standing apart. In the Artwork Essay, the notion of the aura's decay is founded on the social practice of bringing things closer: "Namely, the desire of the present-day masses to 'get closer' to things, and their equally passionate concern for overcoming each thing's uniqueness".<sup>160</sup>

The expansion within the ranges of possible experience through technological means creates an increasing loss of meaning which signifies an ontological emptying of the grounds of experience. The state of 'shock' is in itself a signpost for experiential impoverishment, and leading up to a necessary crisis of experience. A crisis which Benjamin already saw happening within his contemporary, urban Europe. The experience of shock not only denies genuine, complex experience, but through its weakening of the voluntary memory, creates a disruption of the experience of history and tradition. In this weakening resides the underlying factor that makes the 'newness' of new things so appealing. Any new object or fashion needs the force of forgetting to become attractive. Any new worldview "derives its force from what is forgotten. This downstream flow is usually so strong that only the group can give itself up to it"<sup>161</sup> Redeeming this lost tradition is something Benjamin sees as necessary to actually create a possibility for profound social change. But the past has to be recognized and acknowledged, not as fact, but as lived dream. There is therefore an urgent need to awaken, both from the dream sleep of modernity and tradition. Benjamin starts Konvolut K of the *Passagen-werk* by expounding how individual and generational awakening is similar and goes through the same stages, which ends in historical remembrance:

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<sup>159</sup> W. Benjamin, Arcades Project, K7a,1, p. 402

<sup>160</sup> W. Benjamin, The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility, SW3 p. 105

<sup>161</sup> W. Benjamin, Arcades Project, K2a,3, p.393



A generation's experience of youth has much in common with the experience of dreams. Its historical configuration is a dream configuration. Every epoch has such a side turned towards dreams, the child's side. For the previous century, this appears very clearly in the arcades. But whereas the education of earlier generations explained these dreams for them in terms of tradition, of religious doctrine, present-day education simply amounts to the distraction of children. Proust could emerge as an unprecedented phenomenon only in a generation that had lost all bodily and natural aids to remembrance (...). What follows here is an experiment in the technique of awakening.<sup>162</sup>

Interestingly, Benjamin also heralds a form of distraction of the masses, as a form of awakening. In the Artwork essay, the shock effect is most acutely experienced in the medium of film, and through the shock-effect, the masses are distracted from their conventional ways of perceiving reality. The filmatic experience induces a shock-effect because the viewer's contemplation is constantly interrupted by new, moving images. According to Benjamin, this induces a heightened sense of presence. This presence makes film the art form of "awakening", as it corresponds "to the pronounced threat to life in which people live today"<sup>163</sup>. Another way to experience a heightened sense of presence is in ecstatic trance.

## 15. Rausch in a profane world

*To the Planetarium* attempts to base the future collective communion with the cosmos through ecstatic trance. If we are to take his statement seriously, we need to look closer at what this ecstatic trance or *Rausch*-experience actually signifies. And more importantly, what role does this play in relation to a new, technologically transformed future?

Benjamin responds to the separation of *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* by advocating forms of actions that break the boundaries of instrumentality. He encourages a kind of reduction of attention to the environment and actions that rids the individual of strains of instrumental ways of relating to the world. On themes such as the Surrealists, Proust and on hashish, he advocates a de-centered attention that creates a magically induced experience, where the conventional structures of reality dissolve and reconfigures into new re-animated realities. These experiences was for Benjamin gateways to new states of relating to reality, which before were hindered by the

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid, K1,1, p 388

<sup>163</sup> W. Benjamin, Artwork Essay, SW3, n p. 132

habitually established, conventional ways in which man related to his surroundings. Such experiences marked by non-causal, non-linear conceptual associations; "By everything that happens, and by what he says and does, the subject is surprised and overwhelmed....He also attains experiences that approach inspiration, illumination"<sup>164</sup> In this way the individuals relations to the world becomes more multi-dimensional and complex, and at the same time the habitual subject/object dichotomy dissolves. In many ways, Benjamin here falls close to the danger of lapsing into mysticism. And taking his interest in the Kabbalah into account, this is a likely conclusion. As Benjamin notes in his essay on Surrealism that "it is a cardinal error to believe that, of "surrealist experiences" we know only the religious ecstasies or the ecstasies of drugs". Instead it resides in "*profane illumination*, a materialistic, anthropological inspiration..."<sup>165</sup> In these ways of experiencing the world Benjamin attempts to re-discover the origin of the auratic experience. This is the form of auratic experience that needs to be salvaged, as it contains within it the long suppressed yearnings of the collective, who through the advent of modernity has been denied such authentic auratic experience. And the attempt to expand the realm of possible experience through new technologies, such as film, becomes yet another path towards reclaiming this authentic auratic experience, and gain new knowledge "of what is nearest and most remote to us, and never one without the other."<sup>166</sup>

If we look closer at his texts on Surrealism; Benjamin regards their venture as a contribution an expanded theory of experience. Surrealism held within it an embrace of the crisis in the arts, and through it an indicator of the more profound crisis in experience occurring in their time. Implicit in their slogan "*l'art pour l'art*" Benjamin saw not only an aesthetic flight from the political and art as withdrawing from the world, but instead a vehicle for an expanded notion of experience.<sup>167</sup> Surrealism undermines the borders between art and non-art. This is done, according to Benjamin, by transgressing what can be deemed poetic to the extreme, creating new and potentially transforming aesthetic spaces. Within its sphere, Surrealism creates an aesthetisization of existence to the outmost degree, hoping through such poetization of the mundane world, to "obliterate the aesthetic, having dislodged any antithetical

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<sup>164</sup> W. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 215

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid*, p. 227

<sup>166</sup> W. Benjamin, *One Way Street*, p. 487

<sup>167</sup> W. Benjamin, *Surrealism*, SW2, p. 212

principle against which it could flaunt its autonomy.<sup>168</sup> In short, experience itself becomes equivalent to pure *Aisthitikos*, bodily sensuous experience. It was through this form of re-enchantment of the mundane, modern reality, a path towards a new collective communion with the cosmos was sought. But to enable such re-enchantment, first a true disenchantment with the false auratic forms of modern society was necessary.

## 16. Technological Phantasmagoria

It is interesting to see Benjamin's interest in intoxication and "Rauch" as emblematic to the *zeitgeist* of early modernity. As Susan Buck-Morss, in her compelling essay reveals, the numbing of the human sensorium escalated proportionally with the rise of capitalist industry. Drug addiction became an increasing consequence of the self-imposed numbing to the shocks of modern existence, as such numbness became a prerequisite for handling, but also a correlate to the shock-experience itself.<sup>169</sup> The intoxicating experience was not limited to biochemical transformations, of bodily nature. In the nineteenth century, a narcotic was made out of reality itself.<sup>170</sup> The key word for this intoxication of the senses was deemed *Phantasmagoria*.

The word "Phantasmagoria" originated in England in 1802, as the name of an exhibition for optical illusions produced by magic lanterns. In the late eighteenth century several showmen used the lantern to produce horror shows. These were known as "Phantasmagoria" shows. A variety of horrific images were projected to frighten the audience, examples being ghosts projected on smoke to give a frightening appearance and images that would move around the walls. Often the projector was behind a translucent screen, out of the view of the audience. This greatly added to the mystery of the show. As new technologies multiplied in the nineteenth century, so did the potential for phantasmagorical effects.

The shock-experience of urban existence and the alienated forms of industrialized labor creates a fragmented superficial reality. Commodity fetishism renders this reality into a state of illusory splendors and plenitude. During technological change, the individual experiences shock, but at the same time provides

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<sup>168</sup> E. Leslie, *Overpowering Conformism*, p. 20

<sup>169</sup> Buck-Morss, *Aesthetics and Anaesthetics*, p. 21

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid*, p. 21

a compensatory mechanism; *phantasmagoria*. This phenomenon becomes for Benjamin a dialectical 'other' of mass industrialism. Phantasmagorias are defined as illusion, an appearance, which through their technical manipulation deceives the senses. In escalating technological change resides a potential for increasing phantasmagoric effects. Through the *Arcades Project* Benjamin describes how phantasmagoric forms enter the public space. The arcades themselves, and the more recent shopping malls, are examples of the way public space transforms into simulated environments. And within this simulated space, the phantasmagoria induces an 'intoxicating' effect. Referring to Baudelaire's analysis of urban life as marked by religious intoxication he states: "The department stores are temples consecrated to this intoxication."<sup>171</sup> What causes the intoxication? Benjamin would suggest that the interrelatedness between collective dreams of modern man and the character of surface-unity of the phantasmagoria creates its powerful allure.

What does this surface unity relate to? We can see the phantasmagoria as techno-aesthetics, as their perceptions are real enough from a neuro-physical perspective. The appearance floods the nervous system with sensory input. The surface quality of these objects or appearances is one of allure, of captivation and desire. What is hidden is their social function, which is compensatory in nature. In short, the objective is manipulation of the nervous system by control of environmental stimuli. This induces the anaesthetizing effect of the organism.<sup>172</sup> Not by numbing but by flooding the senses. Through this process, a sensory alteration can take place in consciousness, through distraction. Most importantly, this does not take place individually, but within the collective. Through the collective experience of technologically altered realities, a form of consensus emerges which evolves towards objective fact. Instead of the drug-induced experience, which is cut off from community, the *phantasmagoria* becomes social norm.<sup>173</sup> As such, sensory addiction to a technologically altered reality elicits social control.

In the *Passagen-werk*, Benjamin exhibits an ambivalent attitude towards technology. He recognizes its double function: In one way, it expands man's experience, extending the sensual domain, and increases the depth of perception. In opposition, the exposure to the technological extension of possible human experience

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<sup>171</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, A13

<sup>172</sup> S. Buck-Morss, *Aesthetics and Anaesthetics*, p. 21

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid*, p 22

leaves him vulnerable. Technology creates illusion, and in this sense, overrides the human ego's role in order to provide defensive insulation Benjamin foresaw that technology itself could disintegrate the illusions that technology created, awakening man to the underlying reality of urban life. Through this, a true disenchantment paves the way for a re-enchantment of reality.

## 17. New nature

To understand where Benjamin wants us to follow him in his endeavor to liberate the masses from the collective dreams of urban modernity, he needed to reveal for his readers an alternative way of perceiving the context in which the modern masses found themselves. Only through finding such an alternative perception was there a way out of the reality totally engulfed in the mythic world engendered by the new capitalist culture. One such revolutionary way that Benjamin saw as expanding our conception of experience was to be found in the child's inherent mimetic practice.

As mentioned above, Benjamin endeavor is twofold: We are not only to embrace the destruction of auratic experience, but also recover its source. Genuine traces of the auratic experience are not to be recreated, but redeemed. What Benjamin found in the gaze of the child was the unbroken connection between perception and action that marked revolutionary consciousness in adults. This connection was not a passive response to the surroundings, but instead an active, creative form of mimesis, involving the ability to make unintentional correspondences by means of spontaneous fantasy. In play, Benjamin found a connection to the primordial mimetic motor reactions, which served as evidence of the "mimetic faculty", a source of a language of gestures. For him they were "more basic to cognition than conceptual language"<sup>174</sup> In the perception of the child, a completely different and alternative relationship between consciousness and reality, between humanity and the cosmos played itself out. Instead of being limited to a purely linear, historic mode of perception, the interaction of society and human consciousness is not bound solely by the dynamics of domination and submission. In the child, the capacity for revolutionary action was present from the start.

Seen in this light, the state of the child is seen as the always-returning to beginnings. In the child, revolutionary action appears not as an event *in*, but *outside* of

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<sup>174</sup> S. Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing*, p. 264

history, as the perception of the child is to see the world anew. That being said, Benjamin was not attempting an idealization of childhood, but instead believed that only those who were allowed to live out their childhood really grew up. At this juncture, the limitations of the child's consciousness need structure and education. But just as Benjamin disapproves the urge for technological mastery over nature, expressed in *To the Planetarium*: "Is not education above all the indispensable ordering of the relation between generations and therefore mastery, (...), of that relationship and not of children?"<sup>175</sup>

Within the child's reception of reality, Benjamin finds a realm into which both persistence and a true transformation of the mimetic faculty takes place. As previously mentioned, the mimetic faculty, through being in decay, is a sign of our reduced ability to perceive and interact with reality in its "otherness". In the way the child interacts, perceives and organizes their environment, there is no self imposed boundaries between what can and cannot be invoked as play: "A child plays at being not only a grocer or a teacher, but also a windmill and a train"<sup>176</sup> Benjamin developed a notion of the child's playfulness in several sections of *One-Way Street*, (e.g., "Child Hiding), in *Berlin Childhood*, (e.g., "The Sock", "Hiding Places"), or in the *Passagenwerk Konvolut*.<sup>177</sup> The child's readiness for creative mimicry, as in the pretence of being the "other", somebody else, the mimetic capacity reveals itself. The child engages in technological play in such a way that it undercuts the ideological misuse of technology by exploring the technical novelties of modernity with mythic yet potentially utopian meanings.

As we have discussed, there resides alternative ways of interacting with technology. But taken Benjamin's message from the *Artwork Essay* into account, this entails both a dis-enchantment, and re-enchantment of reality. His theory of technology seeks to avoid a new destructive relationship with the evolving technical forms. Instead technology must become a medium of collectivity, so to counteract the diversion of its energy towards war and suppression. In the following, I will present ways that Benjamin suggested would facilitate an alternative, harmonious relationship to a technologically altered cosmos.

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<sup>175</sup> W. Benjamin, *One Way Street*, SW1, p. 487

<sup>176</sup> W. Benjamin, *On The Mimetic Faculty*, *Selected Writings*, Vol.3 p. 721

<sup>177</sup> See for example *Arcades Project*, N2a,1, p. 461

## 18. A new technological Communion with the Cosmos

As we have sketched of the many-faceted face of Benjamin's theories of experience and technology, the question remains: In actual reality, within the here-and-now, how is this new expanded experience induced through technology? In the last part of this essay I will show examples of how Benjamin found ways to counter the alienation and shocks of modernity through an alternative utilization of technology. He saw a potential for redemption and liberation through utilization of the possibilities within the new technologies of reproduction, with particular emphasis on the notion of mimetic innervation and play. This last part of this essay will therefore be discussing the mutually interdependent themes of mimetis, play, innervation, second technology, and how they are actualized in the technologies of photo and film.

As the technological apparatus has tremendous potential within its capacity to de-familiarize the habitual way in which man perceives reality, it became obvious to Benjamin how easily this ability to alter our world could be harnessed for capitalist gain. The phantasmagorical character of the new technologies changed the way we interact with his surroundings. Modern man became confronted with a technology that changed his perception through the 'dislocation' of the senses. Through the increasing dependence on technological devices, our sensuous experience is displaced by a technological *mediation* of the same experience. Seeing becomes infused with lens technology, hearing with that of gramophones and radio, tactility that of mechanized labor. This abstraction of sensation left the human subject alienated. Life in the technically dominated world evolved through increasingly instrumental means. Thus, the "tiny, fragile, human body" encounters the industrialized world. It is a world of fragmentation, revealing the reality behind the phantasmagoric veil: Industrial modernity's true face reveals the impact it had on the bodily sensorium in the beginning of the industrial revolution: "The rates of injuries due to factory and railroad accidents in the nineteenth century made surgical wards look like field hospitals".<sup>178</sup> These developments reveal the transformation of perception far beyond the modern medical profession. In its outmost consequence, this transformation became apparent at the turn of the last century, when "professionalization, technical expertise, division of labor, rationalization of procedures changed social practices."<sup>179</sup> Technological development mirrored this development and transformed the way

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<sup>178</sup> S. Buck-Morss, *Aesthetics and Anaesthetics*, p. 27

society saw its citizens as a “mass”, or organism, becoming a “body” in itself. The “Social body” could be treated as that of the individual body, due to it’s splitting into labor specialization, rationalization and integration of social functions, creating a “techno-body” out of society. As a consequence perception changed into a splitting of experience into agency (surgeon), the object (society/body) and observer.<sup>180</sup> Buck-Morss suggests that an important component in the “shattering of experience” was due to this splitting. For Benjamin, experience is impoverished through self-alienation. And the severing of connection between bodily and cognitive experience creates the sort of Jüngerian vision he appalled. Where Jünger saw technology as expanding human power, and used technology to transcend pain and vulnerability, Benjamin saw humanity’s downfall. The body-as-armor, as mechanized tool, faced the illusion of invulnerability, numbed against feeling. Alienated towards the integrated, sensory realm of the body, man cannot truly be experiencing reality without undoing the numbing of pain. Only through re-experiencing modern life as pain and shock can the human being move towards redemption. The closing passage of the *Artwork essay* reflects this, as the crisis in experience is directly related to the alienation of the senses. He sees the final consequence is global war, and the aesthetic project of the fascists makes it possible for humanity to witness its own destruction as a spectacle. The fascists expected from war “the artistic gratification of the sense perception altered by technology”.<sup>181</sup>

## 19. The Image

Benjamin makes clear the essential relationship between the image -- especially the photographic image -- and modernity. We cannot understand what it means to be modern without grasping the degree to which our experience of the world is defined by what might be called the photographic mentality. We see the world as if we ourselves are cameras, and, at the same time, we see ourselves as objects in a photograph -- at once ourselves and yet other. According to Benjamin, the transformations within technology shape our perception, and our way of perceiving reality and ourselves.

Encountering, and looking into the technical apparatus of the camera, we

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid, p. 28

<sup>180</sup> Ibid, p. 30

<sup>181</sup> W. Benjamin, *Artwork Essay*, p. 122



experience its alien lack of returning the gaze. But in modern urbanity, the camera lens catches the human eye's alienation, and when confronted with the machine, man's eyes "have lost the ability to look."<sup>182</sup> If we look at the statements of "*To the Planetarium*", mankind's emphasis on the visual, optical sense as a means of understanding the cosmos has left him with a narrowed and limited perceptual apparatus, thus limiting the realm of possible experience. Benjamin goes further. Immanent in this diagnosis resides a critique of reason per se. Mankind can only be saved through a retreat from the armored, technologically protected Reasoning Subject. Instead of relying on technology as an extended prosthetic sense-boundary, man needs to re-discover existence as *Aisthitikos*; perceiving reality through the human senses.

Benjamin did however claim that these new technologies contained solutions for resisting the instrumental tendencies emerging in the wake of their evolution, as we have discussed above. One example he pointed to was photography. Challenging the painter's hegemony within portraiture, photography changed the very nature of pictorial representation. Benjamin sees in photographic portraits "the first image of the encounter of machine and human being"<sup>183</sup>. The new reproduction technologies could provide means of resisting the instrumental tendencies within capitalist culture. Photography and film grants man access to involuntary memory, in a way which connected *Erfahrung* to surface impressions, due to its capacity to capture the unintended. According to Benjamin, the fleeting, 'secret' and contingent dimensions of images could paralyze the associative capacity of the viewer, and thus disconnect the voluntary memory. These processes would create a possibility for the flood of images and sensations of the surroundings to be stopped, and at this instant frozen in a monad-like imprint in consciousness that could make it properly integrated into experience. One way this process could come about would be to investigate Benjamin's notion of the "optical unconscious".

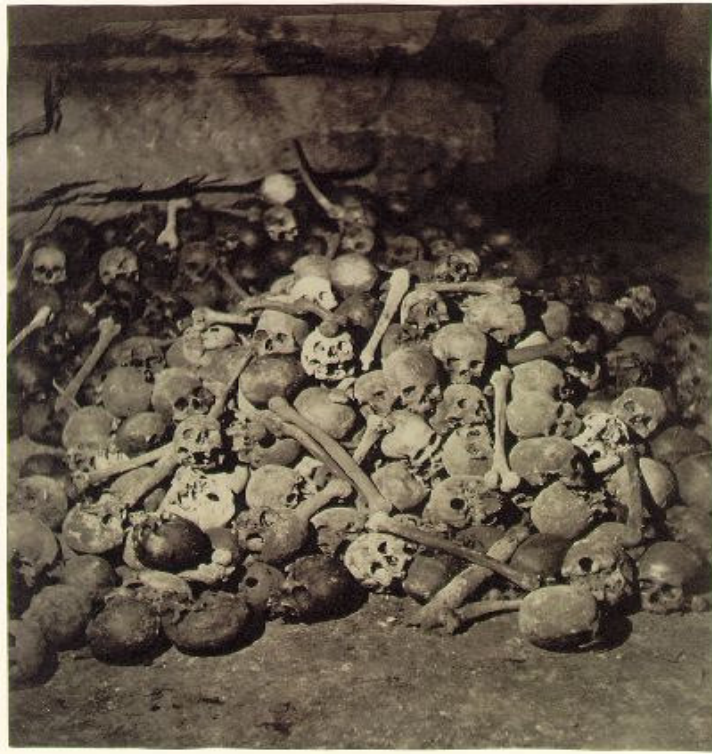
This concept resides among other aspects of the radical possibilities residing within the medium of film and photography. The entire text *A Small History of Photography* is permeated by the notion of the inherent possibilities of photography to create openness to the future which he describes in terms of an "optical unconscious". This concept refers to the transition in which a "space informed by human

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<sup>182</sup> W. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, On some Motifs on Baudelaire, p. 189

<sup>183</sup> W. Benjamin *Arcades Project*, Konvolut Y, Y4a,3, p. 678

consciousness give way to a space informed by the unconscious"<sup>184</sup>. This space fascinated Benjamin in the way that otherness, or that which is not (falsely) auratic permeates the image through being charged with contingency.



Nadar's first pictures of the Paris Catacombs, taken with electric lighting, in the period of 1864-1865.

No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the Here and Now, with which reality has so to speak sear the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long forgotten moment the future subsists so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it. For it is another nature that speaks to the camera rather than the eye: "Other" above all in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious.<sup>185</sup>

This is essence Benjamin's concept of experience. The present is permeated by the future through being a contingency which has the potentiality of retrospectively altering the present state of affairs. The camera lens has the ability to capture space and time, and being marked by contingency, it is removed from the realm of the auratic. The new technology that made new works of art possible was capable of

<sup>184</sup> W. Benjamin, Artwork essay, SW1, p. 117.

<sup>185</sup> W. Benjamin, Little history of Photography, SW2, p. 510

reflecting upon experience from within and changing it.<sup>186</sup> Benjamin found this way of utilizing technology so compelling because it probes beyond the surface of the image. It made a rupture, or shattering of this surface, thus preventing the viewer from hiding behind the appearance of historical continuity. Thus, the mythical within the image is shattered by its contingency. Its 'otherness' provides evidence against myth. The notion of the "optical unconscious" becomes one of the main examples of the radical possibilities inherent in mass media. Its possibility of examining reality with an 'objective' eye separates the film medium from other technological phenomenon, like architecture. Instead of invoking the phantasmagoric, Benjamin believed film creates a way of dismantling the illusory aspects of reality, and thus create possibility for redemption and liberation. Through its shock effect he hopes to dismantle the phantasmagoric illusion of everyday life.<sup>187</sup> Film as vehicle of suspending existing ways of apperception ultimately became a tool of mastery. The shattering effect of the optical unconscious is revealed in its ability to undo other forms of mastery<sup>188</sup> (i.e. the conventional, discursive mode of perception).

Through this undoing of mastery, a new form of mastery over the environment merges. The audience, through the film experience, is drawn out of a discursive, instrumental mode of experience through distraction. In opposition to the distractive fetish-quality of the *phantasmagoria*, film and photography induces a form of distraction that opens a space for an expanded form of experience, and a different mode of interaction with reality. Through this interaction, a "mastery of the relationship between nature and man"<sup>189</sup> emerges. Through this relationship, Benjamin hopes to reconnect with the origin of the auratic experience. Being intimately connected to film, the search for this auratic experience is bound with his notion of mimesis. In the *Artwork Essay*", Benjamin emphasizes the role of cinema as a possible redemptive form of art in a time where technology only is implemented with alienating and violent means. Film is the only medium that might yet counter the catastrophic effects of humanity's already "miscarried reception of technology" that had come to a head with World War I.<sup>190</sup> The shock-experience induced by this war could according to Benjamin be used against itself through film's mimetic capacity.

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<sup>186</sup> Caygill, Walter Benjamin, the Colour of Experience, p. 95

<sup>187</sup> In retrospect we may see that this view of film is outdated, as the phantasmagoric dimensions of Hollywood film industry is a successful merger of capitalism and technology.

<sup>188</sup> E. Leslie. Overpowering Conformism, p. 86

<sup>189</sup> See chapter "communion with a New Nature", p. 45

How? Being mimetic at its core, film technology could rediscover a form of auratic perception, cleansed of the decaying auratic symptoms such as fetishism and myth-making. Within this perception the reengagement of collective memory and experience is induced; forms of memory and experience that contains within them authentic auratic traces. The return of a redeemed auratic mode of experience is opened through the space that is created through the “optical unconscious”. Instead of interpreting aura in terms of theories of commodity fetishism and reification, Benjamin introduces another dimension to the auratic. He indicates that there is another human element in objects which is not the result of reified human labor, or product of fetishization. Instead, the origin of the auratic is found in what humans and non-human nature have in common. This physical connection can be traced back to his 1916 essay on Language.<sup>191</sup> This lost element is the material origin that humans and nature share, an origin that connects Benjamin notion of the “otherness” of things with Freud’s thoughts in his essay on “The Uncanny” (*De Unheimliche*).<sup>192</sup> Through the pre-cognitive, pre-linguistic sense experience can man find its original connection with the universe, and the aura, or its genuine trace. In a note to his essay on the mimetic faculty, Benjamin wonders if not the stars, with their gaze are the Ur-phenomena of the aura.<sup>193</sup> Maybe Benjamin sees the gaze as the original “reading”, and thus instigator of the mimetic faculty.

The mimetic capacity of film thus opens up aspects of possible dimensions of experience previously unimaginable, or formerly neglected within the realm of conventional, instrumentalist modes of perception. Within this “otherness” resides the origin of the auratic trace. The way film renders this possible is not only through the technology, but through the cinematic technique. To make the camera “return the gaze”<sup>194</sup> so to speak, film must do more than just unravel a narrative and plot. Thus, through the utilization of such techniques as montage<sup>195</sup> and discontinuity, a mimetic

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<sup>190</sup> W. Benjamin, Eduard Fuchs, Collector and historian, SW3, p. 266.

<sup>191</sup> W. Benjamin, On Language as Such and on the Language of Man, SW1, p. 62-74

<sup>192</sup> M. Hansen, Benjamin, Cinema and Experience, p. 215

<sup>193</sup> W. Benjamin, On the Mimetic Faculty, SW2, p. 722

<sup>194</sup> In his texts on photography, Benjamin defines the experience of looking into the camera as the eerie sensation of not having your gaze returned. Within this lack of returning does he find technology’s “otherness”.

<sup>195</sup> Montage disrupts the continuity of narrative within art, and was in vogue among Benjamin’s contemporary Surrealists. In cinema, the montage technique includes picture sequence consisting of a series of dissolves, superimpositions, or cuts that elicits the “condensation” of time, or suggests memories or hallucinations. As such, the montage technique within cinema induces a “shock-effect” in that it creates new meaning by disrupting the perception of the narrative, thus making new space for

form of shock is induced that creates access the unconscious memory. Through its collective nature, the film experience can elicit the retraction of the hidden collective memory. This collective memory emerges through distraction. Thus, for Benjamin, “reception in distraction” becomes a sign of a profound alteration of apperception. Benjamin sees film as “the most important subject matter, at present, for the theory of perception which the Greeks called aesthetics.”<sup>196</sup> The connection between the original meaning of Aesthetics, as *Aisthetikos*, (sense perception) and mimetic innervation begins to emerge.

Having a clear political agenda, the Artwork Essay's view of the role of film differs from some of his later texts, emphasizing the link between technology and artistic revolution. In short, Benjamin recognizes that the reality conveyed through film technology is just as *phantasmagoric* as the surface-quality of so-called “reality” that it transmits *ad infinitum*. What he saw in film technology was the potential for disrupting and revealing this surface-quality. This is the critical task of all politicized art: to reveal social reality itself as illusory. Cinema is permeated by technology to such an extent that its mimetic techniques are designed to “make technology itself disappear.”<sup>197</sup> Through this possibility of creating an illusion of reality a new space is created for interpreting reality in truly novel ways.

Within this possibility resides an alternative reception of technology. This alternative rests heavily on his conception of “*innervation*”. Within the *Artwork* text, the actual grounds for the implications of mimetic innervation are found in the notes of the second version.<sup>198</sup> I will argue that “*innervation*” is one of, or maybe *the* essential component in Benjamin's attempt at creating a viable alternative to the current role technology played in modernity. With it, Benjamin saw a possible redeeming potential residing within technologies themselves, and through them reawaken humanity's mimetic contact with the cosmos.

## 20. Innervation

Related to the notion of an optical unconscious familiar from the *Artwork essay*, “*innervation*” refers broadly, to a neurophysiologic process that mediates between the

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interpretation possible.

<sup>196</sup> W. Benjamin, Artwork essay, SW3, p. 120.

<sup>197</sup> M. B. Hansen, Walter Benjamin, Cinema and Experience, p. 203

<sup>198</sup> M. B. Hansen, Benjamin and Cinema, Not a One Way Street, p. 317

internal and external, mental and physical, machine and man. The concept of "innervation" emerged with a "cycle of production" that Benjamin started with *"One Way Street"*, and culminated with the *Passagen-werk*, and included such texts as essays on surrealism, Proust and Kafka, the Berlin Childhood essays, and other texts, and finally *"Experience and Poverty"*. Benjamin initially takes up the issue of "innervation" in his 1929 essay "Surrealism".<sup>199</sup> Here he develops a notion of "collective innervation" of mankind's body through technology. Here the issue of a new *Physis* organized by technology is discussed together with a focus on the sensuous nature of our collective contact with it. Benjamin's interest in the term shows itself in his next major work, *One Way Street*, which signals Benjamin's return to Marxism. That said, the twin emphasis of technology and psychoanalysis influences not only the thematic and theoretical concerns, but also its avant-garde mode of representation., it's textual strategies that articulate, or "innervate", the political, erotic, and aesthetic implications of the pathway cut by modernity, the street that entwines technological and psychic registers in the books title trope. In *One Way Street* the term appears only twice, but the idea or concept pervades the text in a series of variations, and culminates with its concluding piece, *To the Planetarium*.<sup>200</sup> The two places where "innervation" is used explicitly articulate two distinct notions of *Technik*.<sup>201</sup> In one case Benjamin relates technology to the ancient practice of Yoga, in the other to the tools of writing. Under the subheading "*Prayer Wheel*", Benjamin states axiomatically: "No imagination without innervation". This is elaborated further by exemplifying how the link between innervation and imagination was once "embodied" in an ancient somatic, yet spiritual practice; Yoga. Rooted in the bodily sensorium, without emphasis on intellect, this practice incorporates what Benjamin defines as the original mimetic practice.

Where Benjamin borrowed the concept from is unclear, but Miriam Bratu Hansen suggests that although clearly of Freudian origins, the term was also used in the neurophysiologic and psychological discourse of the period.<sup>202</sup> Freud's use of the term is context-dependent, but while in the context of studies of hysteria innervation is described as a way of responding to internal excitation. In Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*, the sources of stimulation also include factors outside the body. The

<sup>199</sup> W. Benjamin, *Surrealism*, SW2, p. 217

<sup>200</sup> M. Hansen, *Benjamin and Cinema*, p. 314

<sup>201</sup> *Technik* as used by Benjamin is referring to both technology and technique.

distinction between external and internal sources of stimuli is continued in later writings, when discussed in relation to trauma, or neurosis originating from mechanical violence, which overwhelms the nervous system.<sup>203</sup> This perspective coincides with Benjamin's description of trauma, or shock in confrontation with industrial warfare, and the following decay of experience.

For Benjamin, innervation becomes a term functioning as compensatory concept, standing as an alternative, or cure to the technologically multiplied shock and its numbing effects. But what does this alternative countering of the sensorial numbing created by technology imply? Benjamin here parts ways with most of his contemporaries, as he embraces an altogether different outlook on the relation between the artificial and the natural, the body and the object, consciousness and matter. To counter the shock of the shattering of experience, our notions of the relations between man, technology and nature must transform. Buck Morss reads Benjamin as using "innervation" as a term for the mimetic reception of the external world. This reception is active and empowering, in contrast to the defensive mimetic adaptation that protects at the consequence of freezing or numbing the organism and its ability to imagine, and thus to actively create a response to the impressions received.<sup>204</sup> Benjamin saw this response as consisting of a process of receiving and responding, where the distinction between the somatic and mechanical became blurry. To do this, a completely different notion of technology and nature emerged in Benjamin's thought.

## 21. Innervating Second Technology; Play

As Benjamin expounded enigmatically in *To the Planetarium*, the basis for his idea of technological redemption is built on revolution. Firstly, the notion of revolution is inspired by the Marxist movements originating in the wake of WWI. Secondly it leans on Benjamin's reading of Judaism. But ultimately, there is no liberation from the state of affairs in which technology has shattered traditional experience. Mankind is forced into new ground, as there is no way of retracing our steps and returning to edenic, pre-technological harmony. The only alternative is to transform mankind's outmoded separation between nature and technology, between *Techne* and *Physis*. To do this,

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<sup>202</sup> M. B. Hansen, Benjamin on Cinema, Not a One Way Street, p. 317

<sup>203</sup> Ibid, p. 316

<sup>204</sup> Buck Morss, Aesthetics and Anaesthetics, p. 17 n. 54

the Benjamin wanted to use the energies unleashed by the technological upheaval of modernity, and through it "liquidate" the traditional technological paradigm:

It is the goal of revolutions to accelerate this, the body emancipated by the liquidation of the first technology<sup>205</sup>

Susan Buck-Morss argues that technology transforms nature through social and historical activity; this resulting "second nature" cannot be reduced to an "alienated, "reified" subjectivity, a world created by humans, who did not recognize it as their own", and much like what Lukács notion of "Second nature" refers to<sup>206</sup>. But unlike Lukács, Benjamin takes the concept beyond its initial Hegelian, historical and praxis-oriented focus, and articulates a conception of technology where it anticipates the function it has acquired in the process of material complexification. Instead, material nature for Benjamin was other than the subject, and remained in this "otherness" independent on how much mankind invested in it by means of labor or conceptualization. Therefore, a specifically technological form of "alienation" must in this respect be distinguished from the alienation emphasized by the most influential Hegelian readers of Marx, like Lukács, and Adorno. But what does Lukács and Hegel imply when setting up this division of a first and second nature? Lukács borrows from Hegelian categories when introducing "second nature" within his social critique. Hegel drew a line between a pure and unspoiled nature of physical and biological laws, forms and processes, and a "second nature" made up of cultural products of man, implying the market, the urban landscape and technical devices. Through the historical process, Lukács points out that "Second Nature" becomes 'second nature', meaning our natural, self-evident nature; our only nature. Benjamin uses this term in a similar way to argue that conceptions of nature as static, given, non-social and non-historical are problematic. When the artificial, technological, cultural, man-made acquires familiarity, it becomes "second nature", meaning part of what is given.

Consequently, for Benjamin, the historical becomes natural through use, bringing the natural forth as subject to social and technological pressures. In the same manner, the historical makes natural what is of technical nature, making it close to irrelevant to strive for categorical distinction between the natural and the technological. A new nature contains the technological, and this relation is precisely

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<sup>205</sup> W. Benjamin, "A different Utopian Will", SW3, p. 134



articulated in relation to art:

One can formulate the problem of form in the new art bluntly: when and how will the worlds of forms that have arisen in mechanics, in film, machine construction and the new physics, and that, without our assistance, have emerged and overpowered us, make what is natural in them clear to us? When will the condition of society be reached in which these forms or those which have arisen from them open themselves up to us as natural forms? <sup>207</sup>

In the 1935 *Expose* for his *Passagen-werk* Benjamin investigates how existence and consciousness are reformulated "in the light of the new technical and social reality".<sup>208</sup> In the new technological devices there rests potential for a new "second nature" we find embodied a contact between humankind and the world on which society and its structures are formed. In such a way, Benjamin separates himself from many other theoreticians of technology, and designates technology as the very modern form of Nature, *Physis*, itself. Accordingly, the latter part of *To the Planetarium* highlights the essence of his theory of technology, and becomes the mediating factor between man and nature. Through technology, a *Physis* is being formed through which mankind's interaction with the cosmos takes a new and different form from that which it had in "nations and families".<sup>209</sup>

Having attempted to yoke technology to human practice, the medium of film and photography creates a sphere where this interaction becomes apparent. In Benjamin's later work the link between technology and artistic revolution central to the politicized emphasis of the *Artwork* essay is abandoned in favor of more central, yet general questions.<sup>210</sup> Rather than continuing to ask how film can underwrite a revolutionary politization of aesthetics, he poses the question which summarizes his concern with technological change: How can a harmonious, nondestructive relationship with the cosmos be established and maintained when this cosmos is technologically driven?

For Benjamin the concept of innervation has the specific function of suspending or countering the impressions and shock experience of modern culture.

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<sup>206</sup> S.Buck Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing*, p. 70

<sup>207</sup> W. Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, K3a,2, p. 396

<sup>208</sup> W. Benjamin, 1935 *Exposé*, *Arcades Project*, p. 4

<sup>209</sup> W. Benjamin, *One Way Street*, SW1, p. 487

<sup>210</sup> In texts such as "*On some Motifs on Baudelaire*" we see a more humble approach where the question that is concerning Benjamin reflects his initial interests in the interplay of the collective human body and the universe.

Through its counter effect, innervation frees the ability to perceive what is previously blocked in the Freudian combination of shock, breach and the repression; the discharge that alone could undo the anaesthetizing effects pointed to by Benjamin. In Buck-Morss way of reading this notion, the term innervation is Benjamin's way of creating a mimetic reception of the external world.<sup>211</sup> This implies a response, rather than a reaction. This is similar to how children relate to animate and inanimate objects in their surroundings in a mimetic way. This way of understanding the role of Innervation reflects his interest in the perception of reality of the child. Within it rests a key redemptive potential for modern man's technological reality. What is redemptive within the innervation between man and the technological?

To make the concept applicable to receptions of technology, Benjamin's use of the term *innervation* designates a two-way process within a psychological perspective. This refers to a process of re-conversion, recollecting and recovering split-off psychic energy through motoric stimulation. This is possible due to Benjamin's emphasis on the inherent porosity of boundaries between man and surroundings, enabling a greater circulation of psychic energies. There is a response instead of mere reaction, making the interaction between somatic and mechanic existence dominated not by protection and shielding, but by inducing and mediating stimuli. Accordingly, Film technology has a potential for a new, technologically rendered softening of the shield of protection induced by the shock experience of modern life.<sup>212</sup>

The ancient's way of bodily-oriented cosmic communion exemplified the integrated use of technique and imagination. But this only serves as an already "antique", ritualistic, pre-mechanical notion of the technical. Thus, this is only serving the purpose of defining a difference between the ancient "first" *Technic*, and the second. This is done in a more in-depth manner in the *Artwork essay*, where he attempts through this division to redefine the relationship between aesthetic technique and industrial technology. This second technology originates in mankind's unconscious attempt to distance itself from nature, whereas the first technology seeks to immerse man into a communion with nature. They both take the same starting point

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<sup>211</sup> S. Buck-Morss, *Aesthetics and Anaesthetics*, p. 16. Repression, or "anticathexis", in psychoanalytic theory, relates to the energy required for the ego to maintain repression of unacceptable ideas and impulses.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid*, p. 17

from the human body's degree of involvement with matter. The first technology was based on the total involvement by man, the second technology on man's increasing detachment from it. This distancing from nature is brought poetically to our attention in the *Artwork Essay*. The ancient way of relating to nature through the "first technology" was by the "maximum use of human beings", and the "second technology" of our modern time "reduces their use to the minimum"<sup>213</sup>. Reflecting his statements in *One Way Street*, he takes an unusual turn: The achievements of the first technology might be said to culminate in the human sacrifice: "those of the second, in the remote-controlled aircraft, which needs no human crew."<sup>214</sup> Benjamin here connects lines of reasoning from *To the Planetarium*. Where the ancients' collective communion with the cosmos was based on intimacy with the technical, technological warfare in the First World War was marked by distance. He continues:

The results of the first technology are valid once and for all. (it deals with irreparable laps or sacrificial death). The results of the second are wholly provisional (it operates by means of experiments and endlessly varied test procedures).<sup>215</sup>

The ancient way of technological communion was grounded not in instrumentality but ritual. The objective was consequently fused with the process of obtaining it, and therefore "eternal", resting on another conception of time, space and different mode of perception. In short, in cosmic communion, meaning was both found and invoked. The nature of the second technology, based on the notion of progress and industry are never more than instrumental in relation to means and ends. Hence, the technological interaction is marked by the ephemeral: Modernity will always leave the old in favor of the new in the ongoing technological quest. The nature of the second technology finds its culmination in war due to being based on distance. Distancing from man is the constitution of the second technology, but its origin lies elsewhere:

The origins of the second technology lie at the point where, by an unconscious ruse, human beings first began to distance themselves from nature. It lies, in other words, in play (*Spiel*).<sup>216</sup>

What can Benjamin refer to? Obviously, something is lost in translation, when

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<sup>213</sup> W. Benjamin, *Artwork essay*, SW3, p. 107

<sup>214</sup> W. Benjamin, *One Way Street*, SW1, p. 487

<sup>215</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Artwork essay*, SW 3, p. 107

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid*, p. 107

translating the term *Spiel* to English. In the multiple, German meanings of the word, 'play' can also mean 'gamble', 'performance', 'game', 'execution' and 'act'. In this term, Benjamin provides us with a term, and a concept that makes him able to imagine an alternative mode of aesthetics that is aligned with the collective experience of the "second technology". Here, he found a mode of perception that counteracted the consequences of the catastrophic reception of technology within modernity.<sup>217</sup> To Benjamin, this distancing is of a different form than what is emphasized by the rest of the Frankfurt School, who viewed technology as mainly grounded in instrumentalist agendas. For him, "mastery of nature" or *Naturbeherrschung* as a goal for the modern, second technology is defined "from the position of the first"<sup>218</sup>. The motivation for mastery of nature emerged out of necessity in the ancient world.

When Benjamin traces the origin of the second technology back to the notion of play, he reveals a radically different conception of nature and man; the second technology emerges not as a consequence of opposition to nature, but rather by *interplay* of humanity and nature. The interplay expounded in *To the Planetarium*. In the *Artwork Essay*, this conception of interplay between the human and non-human leads him to the importance of how art and technology can "rehearse" this interplay:

This applies to film. The function of film is to train human beings in the apperceptions and reactions needed to deal with a vast apparatus whose role in their lives is expanding almost daily. Dealing with this apparatus also teaches them that technology will release them from their enslavement to the powers of the apparatus only when humanity's whole constitution has adapted itself to the new productive forces which the second technology has set free.<sup>219</sup>

This clarifies Benjamin's reasons for his interest in the medium of film. Film, as technological innervation, or more precisely as a "play form of second nature"<sup>220</sup>, can potentially serve the function of "establishing equilibrium between human beings and the apparatus"<sup>221</sup>.

Here we again find reflected the concluding remarks of *To the Planetarium*:

In technology, a Physis is being organized through which mankind's contact with the cosmos

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<sup>217</sup> M. B. Hansen, Room-for-Play; Benjamin's gamble with Cinema, October 109, p. 6

<sup>218</sup> Walter Benjamin, Artwork essay, Selected writings, Vol. 3, p. 107

<sup>219</sup> M. Hansen, Room-for-Play, p. 108

<sup>220</sup> Walter Benjamin, Artwork essay, Selected writings, Vol. 3, p. 117

<sup>221</sup> Ibid, p. 117

takes a new and different form from which it had in nations and families.<sup>222</sup>

Only through a revolutionary change of perception, into which the mass-consciousness can collectively adapt itself to the possibilities of the new, second technology, is a genuine possibility of a new redeemed future for humanity possible. Film assumes this task because of its potential for reversing the collective, misaligned relationship between humanity and *Techne*<sup>223</sup>. This reversal could happen in the form of play. Instead of leading humanity to further suppression, alienation and self-destruction, the second technology could be rescued from the capitalist-industrial paradigm and become public, common and collective. The medium's technical nature, along with its collective mode of reception could lead the technological into social consciousness: Thus, the second nature of the individual (i.e. technology) becomes the first nature of the collective, through filmatic play.

The way *innervation* could regulate this interplay of human and mechanical nature was for Benjamin dependent on a return to the mode of perception ingrained in the ancient's mimetic practices of the first technology. In *To the Planetarium*, this implied the way ancient communion with the cosmos took place in and through the mimetic practices of the body. This means a turning away from the emphasis on the optical, dualistic mode of perception dominating the second technology and instead paying heed to the body as the "preeminent instrument of sensory perception and (moral and political) differentiation".<sup>224</sup> In the following, I will discuss how Benjamin envisaged this notion of mimetic innervation, could expand to a conception of a collective bodily innervation.

## 22. Collective innervation: Mankind redeemed?

In recollection of Jünger's embrace of the fusing of technology and body, Benjamin here takes us down a different path. Instead of heralding the coming of the second, alien, technological ethos found in Jünger's texts, Benjamin points to a turning away from the objectifying relationship between man and technology towards a more

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<sup>222</sup> W. Benjamin, *One Way Street*, Selected Writings, Vol. 1. p. 487

<sup>223</sup> It is tempting to point out Benjamin's apparent inconsistencies in his argument relating to the role of cinematic art within the transformation of human perception of technology. In particular, his emphasis on the "function" of film as a transformative tool for collective interplay of man and machine is recast in clearly instrumentalist terms. This view stands in stark opposition to his embrace of the Surrealist "art for art's sake".

<sup>224</sup> B. Hansen, *Benjamin and Cinema*, Not a One-Way Street, p. 321.

subjective, bodily-oriented praxis. Instead of relating to the body as mere object, mankind's relationship towards nature could be salvaged through a return to the body as arena for mimetic imaginative practices that include the technical. In short, this can be seen as a new attempt at mimetic "wooing with the Cosmos". This form of bodily-oriented innervation is still technological, yet it stands in stark comparison to the dualistic, objectified realm of the industrialized modern subject's powerlessness towards the imposing forces of industrialized progress. The nature of such powerlessness is seen in the face of the workers who "throughout the workday in offices and factories, have to relinquish their humanity in the face of an apparatus."<sup>225</sup> Instead, the potential of an imaginative innervation originating from the body resides in it's capability of being self-regulated. The interest found in Benjamin's texts on Surrealism, alternative modes of perception (i.e. children's play), altered states of consciousness, and experiments with hashish are all examples of how he attempted to find sources for how this return to a purely subjective, self-regulated praxis was to come about<sup>226</sup>.

In opposition to the modern, private realm of individuation, the message in *To the Planetarium* is "man can be in ecstatic contact with the cosmos only communally"<sup>227</sup>. We may now appreciate a deeper level of Benjamin's interest in the collective reception of the second technology. Here, a "collective body" of humanity is possible, where the notion of the corporeal is extended to perceive the technological no longer as second nature, but as a "first nature of the collective."<sup>228</sup> In reading Benjamin this way, we can glimpse an unusual emphasis of the collective (proletarian) body as a site for the technological revolution. A possible way out of the barbarism of 20th century modernity is found in a footnote to the second version of the Artwork Essay:

Revolutions are innervations of the collective - or, more precisely, efforts at innervation on the part of the new, historically unique collective which has its organs in the new technology. This second technology is a system in which the mastering of elementary social forces is a precondition for playing [das Spiel] with natural forces.<sup>229</sup>

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<sup>225</sup> W. Benjamin, Artwork essay, SW3, p. 111

<sup>226</sup> Ibid, p. 321

<sup>227</sup> W. Benjamin, To the Planetarium, One Way Street, SW1, p. 486

<sup>228</sup> W. Benjamin, Artwork essay, SW 3, n, p. 124

<sup>229</sup> Ibid, n, p. 124

He continues by illustrating how this utopian interplay with nature should come about by using an example from developmental psychology. The child learns through reaching for the unreachable and "...stretches out its hand for the moon as it would for a ball"<sup>230</sup>. Humanity needs to uphold similar utopian aspirations. The second technology, originating in play, can through the proletarian revolution become a vehicle for increased freedom:

Because this (second) technology aims at liberating human beings from drudgery, the individual suddenly sees his scope for play, his field of action [Spielraum] immeasurably expanded.<sup>231</sup>

Inherent in this expanded field of action is also a crossing of political and natural history, which later would become a main concern in his anthropological materialist<sup>232</sup> politics. The utopian impulse in all revolutionary acts has a two-sided effect:

No sooner has the second technology secured its initial revolutionary gains than vital questions affecting the individual - questions of love and death which had been buried by the first technology - once again press for solutions<sup>233</sup>

To grasp what is meant by such questions, Benjamin emphasizes the way revolutionary movements induce a double "utopian will". After the initial upheaval of the second nature has made itself present, deeper and more subjective processes makes itself visible. Alongside the scientific and technological utopias of the second technology, a more subjective "utopia of the first" emerges. Bodily oriented, subjective dimensions of the human individual, previously neglected by the first technology, suddenly finds ways to express themselves."<sup>234</sup> What are these dimensions? For Benjamin, this entails existential questions [*Lebensfragen*]: "questions of love and death". This unorthodox fusion of existential and political lines of reasoning may lose some of their obscure character if we recall the intrinsic connection between the suppressed urge for cosmic communion that re-emerged as the "slave revolt" of technology in *To the Planetarium*, and specifically at the very end of the text: "*Living substance conquers the frenzy of destruction only in the*

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<sup>230</sup> Ibid, n. p. 124

<sup>231</sup> Ibid, n. p. 124

<sup>232</sup> Ibid, n. p. 124

<sup>233</sup> Ibid, n. p. 124

<sup>234</sup> Ibid, n. p. 124

*ecstasy of procreation*.<sup>235</sup> The connection between these final words of the text with the Artwork Essay above concerns the notion of "unresolved revolutionary demands of the first organic nature", and how these demands make themselves a vehicle for overcoming the destruction (death) through procreation [*Liebe*] (love, *Eros*, sex)<sup>236</sup>. If we follow Benjamin's reasoning, he diagnoses this rejected urge for collective communion as an intrinsic rejection of true existential needs, the needs that the proletariat cannot satiate within a bourgeois-capitalist paradigm. Through the revolution of the proletariat, a new "image-space" can be created out of the destruction of the bourgeois mode of perception, where such *Lebensfragen* can be posed and answered. This new image-space is set up by novel technological practices, and is constituted by the destruction of the old ways of perceiving reality.<sup>237</sup> The "space for play" or "field of action" that is set up by technology expands, but mankind is still unable to familiarize itself with its potential. Instead of welcoming the new technological potential as a possibility of expanding this field of action, bourgeois-capitalist interests, "and their lust for profit" took advantage of it, and turned the techno-wooing of the cosmos from a "bridal bed into a bloodbath".<sup>238</sup> In the modern capitalist paradigm, technology becomes a tool for domination over nature and the proletariat. Consequently, it is in their interest to close their eyes to the political implications of technology, as "second nature".

These dimensions of what potential "liberating" practices of the new technologies can elicit directs our attention to the interest Benjamin had in the early social utopian literature, and especially Charles Fourier<sup>239</sup>, whom Benjamin dedicated considerable attention to in his *Passagen-werk*. In short, the potential residing within his utopian science-fiction project is one that not only could transform, but also redress the discrepancies in human historical existence. Here his Messianistic vision of redeeming the past merges with his future-oriented Marxist agenda of the liberation of the proletariat. It is here that the concept of innervation must be seen in the light of his more basic speculations on history.

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<sup>235</sup> Walter Benjamin, *One Way Street*, SW1, p. 487

<sup>236</sup> M. Hansen, *Room-for-Play*, p. 19

<sup>237</sup> The images of our perceptions and ideas, and the metaphors with which we are surrounded, are seen by Benjamin as 'body- and image-space'

<sup>238</sup> Walter Benjamin, *One Way Street*, SW 1, p. 487

<sup>239</sup> Fourier was a French social theorist and reformer who urged that society be reorganized into self-contained, agrarian cooperatives which he called "phalansteries"



### 23. Film, innervation, catharsis

We are by a detour back to the relation between film and innervation. As we have discussed some key aspects of the relation between the technologies of reproduction, innervation, mimetic play, and as the possibility of a new cosmic communion, the role of film in Benjamin's thinking has become more evident. The situation in which the early industrialized modernity found itself was therefore one of apparent shortcomings within the human constitution and historic predicament. Man was not yet able to suspend the "natural limitations" of both his body and society. It is out of this thematic juncture, between the historical, aesthetical and political, that Benjamin sketches a theory of film that he envisaged as able to overcome the physiological, historical, and ideological limitations of the human body. What does this mean in relation to his theory of technology?

Firstly, the medium of film was for him a tool able to extend the human perceptual capacity to an extent that the camera adopts "Messianic-prophetic power"<sup>240</sup>. It became a compensatory tool for the limitations of the human sensorium. Further it was seen as potentially capable of dismantling conventional modes of perceiving reality, and finally it made possible a realization of the Surrealist dream of a merger between image and body space into the sensorium of the collective, meaning into the collective mode of reception.<sup>241</sup> As mentioned, in *Surrealism* from 1929, Benjamin develops the notion of a "collective innervation" of mankind's body through technology. Again we see his emphasis on a new *Physis* being technologically organized, emphasizing the sensuous nature of our collective contact with it.

Only when in technology, body and image space [*Bildraum*] so interpenetrate that all revolutionary tension becomes bodily collective innervation, and all bodily innervations of the collective become revolutionary discharge, will reality have transcended itself to the extent demanded by the *Communist Manifesto*.<sup>242</sup>

The operative agents of such collective innervations are those technologies of reproduction that Benjamin would come to focus on in the 1930s: photography, radio, gramophone and film in particular. The hope Benjamin saw for establishing a sensuous mimetic relationship with the cosmos as *second* nature, had to come from

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<sup>240</sup> B. Hansen, Benjamin and Cinema, Not a One-Way Street, p. 323

<sup>241</sup> W. Benjamin, Surrealism, SW2, p. 217, See also Body - and Image - Space: Re-Reading Walter Benjamin by Jeremy Gaines, Rachel McNicholl, Georgina Paul, Sigrid Weigel; Routledge, 1996

the experiential potential that such reproductive technologies facilitated. But can this kind of relationship be realized in actuality? Is there an actual “interplay” between Man and machine? We can discern a slight rhetorical element in Benjamin's polemical use of sexual and archaic language, reminiscent to his borrowing of the language of Surrealism.

It is important to see his emphasis on using Surrealist metaphors as just that; metaphors. These images do not hide the fact that there cannot be an actual interplay between the human *Physis* and technology. As such, he is in stark opposition to the Jüngerian ideal of dislocation of subjective experience in favor of an “objective” merger of man and machine. Benjamin knows only too well that this interaction is of a metaphoric, or rather “imaginary” character. That said, the true agenda for his emphasis on *innervation* lies in the creative and transformative energies being released, in the sphere of the political as well as art.<sup>243</sup> This is the true intention Benjamin has towards mimetic innervation with the second technology. And also the best explanation we can get as to what innervation actually *does*. Through these liberated energies, the intention from *To the Planetarium* can be realized, and harness the power of these energies towards a liberation of the proletariat. But there is yet another dimension in *To the Planetarium*, which seeks a re-awakening of the mimetic faculty, within the technologically infused second nature. To this task I will spend the last part of this paper.

## **24. A return to the mimetic; Innervation as Catharsis?**

The impulse to theorize technology is for Benjamin, a component of a greater conceptual mosaic created to re-imagine the aesthetical in a time where the conditions of experience, affectivity, memory and imagination needs to be salvaged from the ruins of history called modernity.<sup>244</sup> It is within this project that theorizing over the technically changed human sensorium finds its place.

Beauty is semblance. In Benjamin's texts on aesthetics this recognition appears as symptomatic of the age that is ending. With mechanical reproduction technologies, the beautiful as sensuous appearance of the true or sensuous appearance of an idea was no longer valid. The shattering of tradition and the destruction of traditional

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<sup>242</sup> W. Benjamin, *Surrealism, Selected Writings*, Vol. 2 p. 218

<sup>243</sup> M. Hansen, *Benjamin and Cinema*, p. 324

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid*, p. 325

experience detached the notion of beauty from its reference, creating a conceptual void needing to be filled. Technology, as either transformative and liberating, or destructive and oppressive, makes Benjamin look for the origin of the classical distinction between semblance and play. We here run into one of numerous problems of translation in Benjamin's texts, as the German nouns *Shein* and *Spiel* has different and more figurative connotations than its equivalent in English. *Shein* and *Spiel*, is traced back to German Idealism and ultimately to the ancient practice of mimesis. As mentioned in the first section of this essay, Benjamin bids for a new understanding of the mimetic practice, and introduces a way of seeing the mimetic impulse as inherent both within the human sensorium and in things themselves.<sup>245</sup> Benjamin's approach to mimesis has philosophical precursors.<sup>246</sup> According to Benjamin, in this ancient original form, semblance and play were to sides of the same coin, as it originated in the same human body. Initially, language and dance, as bodily practices had as basic characteristics of making things "apparent". In short, they play, or perform the "thing". As such, this reveals the polar qualities originally residing in the mimetic: "Semblance and play form an aesthetic polarity"<sup>247</sup>. With the emergence of western art there emerged an emphasis on semblance, manifesting itself as "Beautiful Semblance" within the western tradition.<sup>248</sup> Being based on repetitious, experimenting and imaginative modalities, play is potentially a mode of action better suited for envisaging alternatives to the barbarism, and catastrophe of history. Now we may be better able to grasp why Benjamin put such emphasis on the *innervation* of second technology, founded in play. Miriam Bratu Hansen reads the concept of play as "potentially sidetracking the catastrophic history." She places the role of the second technology not only "in terms of is destructive, anaesthetic trajectory" but at the same time based "in a ludic and performative impulse"<sup>249</sup>. There is for Benjamin a hidden, yet drastically promising dimension inherent in second technology's potential role as

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<sup>245</sup> See previous chapter,

<sup>246</sup> As with his concept of experience, his debt to the Kantian tradition becomes apparent. In *Kritik der Urteilskraft*. Kant makes a distinction between two types of imitation: '*nachfolgen*' and '*nachahmen*'. The former type has creative, the latter merely reproductive. Benjamin also is formed by the Nietzschean distinction between two types of mimesis; a reproductive and productive function of the imagination.

<sup>247</sup> W. Benjamin, The Significance of Beautiful Semblance, SW3, p. 137

<sup>248</sup> For an exemplary discussion of the relation between semblance and play in the idealist tradition, read Shiller's account of Beauty as semblance vs. play, see M. Beardsley, *Aesthetics from Classical Greece to the Present*, University of Alabama Press, 1966, p. 299.

<sup>249</sup> B. Hansen, Benjamin and Cinema, Not a One-Way Street, p. 330

counter-force to the re-mythologization of modernity:

A mimetic innervation of technology would counter the perpetuation of illusion promoted by fascism with an aesthetics of play, an imagination that plays games - but also, (...) gambles - with technology's otherness.<sup>250</sup>

Remembering what Benjamin defined as the essential characteristic of the photograph, it's contingent, immediate and non-intentional character; the innervation is here with what is not-the-same. We have through a technological mimesis been introduced to a new nature, never seen before. As a technological paradigm shift, the shooting of a film was seen as a hitherto unimaginable spectacle and a second-degree realism that leads him to compare the filmmaker to a surgeon. Unlike the magician, who heals by a laying-on of hands, the surgeon heals by penetrating the body. Benjamin continues to explain that it is "another nature which speaks to the camera as compared to the eye.'Other' above all in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious."<sup>251</sup> As these new dimensions of reality, hitherto unrecognizable by the naked eye, became accessible through the use of the film camera, new ways of relating to nature also becomes possible. Going beyond our preconditioned ways of seeing, the 'optical unconscious' presents the observer with a vast space, or field of action, where the unimaginable takes place. This is for Benjamin the encounter of which technology is the mediator: a new relationship between man and nature: "It is through the camera that we first discover the optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis."<sup>252</sup>

Benjamin sees these two types of unconscious as closely related, as the camera captures dimensions of reality outside normal sense impressions. Through film, the divide between the realm of dreams and waking life has been transgressed. Benjamin sees the camera as responsible for creating a link so that "the individual perceptions of the psychotic or the dreamer can be appropriated by collective perception."<sup>253</sup> Here, we see a perspective closely resembling that of *To the Planetarium*, where "The 'Lunaparks' are reconfigurations of sanatoria"<sup>254</sup>. This implies that technological

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<sup>250</sup> Ibid, p. 324

<sup>251</sup> Walter Benjamin, Artwork essay, Selected writings, Vol. 3, n, p. 122

<sup>252</sup> Ibid, p. 117

<sup>253</sup> Ibid, p. 118

<sup>254</sup> W. Benjamin, One Way Street, SW1, p 487 "Lunaparks" had their heyday at beginning of the last

‘entertainment’ can function as a balancing force for the masses, instead of pertaining to technological play as a phantasmagoric training ground for factory labor. This could be done not by “depicting the dream world itself than by creating figures of collective dream, such as the globe-encircling Mickey Mouse”.<sup>255</sup> In the transference between the subject on screen and the audience, there exists an antidote to the violent return of suppressed pathologies. The yearning for renewed ecstatic communion hitherto denied them in modern life can find its outlet in a “therapeutic detonation of the unconscious:

*If one considers the dangerous tensions which technology and its consequences have engendered in the masses at large – tendencies which at critical stages take on a psychotic character – one also has to recognize that this same technologization [Technisierung] has created the possibility of psychic immunization against such mass psychoses. (...) Collective laughter is one such preemptive and therapeutic eruption of such mass psychoses.*<sup>256</sup>

The film provoke this laughter through playing with the animate and inanimate, human and mechanical traits, but also through staging shocks, or rather counter shocks that creates a conversion between audience and film. Potentially, this effect also “innervate” between the human sensorium and the apparatus in such a way to create a re-conversion of split-off neurotic energy into sensory affect.<sup>257</sup>

The Artwork essay’s message in relation to the “social function” of film technology becomes dependent on its “destructive, cathartic side”: the liquidation of the value of tradition in the cultural heritage”<sup>258</sup>. Although this is the only context Benjamin explicitly uses the word “cathartic” in relating to the destruction of the auratic. But this “liquidation” of tradition is not the only way I read Benjamin’s view of film technology as cathartic. In relation to how film provokes “collective laughter”, there are striking similarities to a very classical notion of catharsis; found in the “Poetics” of Aristotle. Reading through one interpretation of catharsis we notice the following in relation to Aristotle’s definition of the term as “through pity and fear

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century. They combined technological novelties and fairground attractions which came popular among the working class in both Europe and America.

<sup>255</sup> W. Benjamin, Artwork essay, SW3, p. 118. Mickey Mouse played the role as the allegorical figure of which the innervation between the human sensorium and the new, second nature took place.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid, p. 118

<sup>257</sup> E. Leslie, Overpowering Conformism. p. 157

<sup>258</sup> W. Benjamin, Artwork essay, SW3, p 104

effecting the proper purgation of these emotions”<sup>259</sup>. The traditional interpretation of this line goes as follows: “...that tragedy, by arousing these emotions, has some sort of therapeutic effect upon the audience’s mental health, giving a pleasurable sense of relief- “in calm of mind, all passion spent””<sup>260</sup>. It seems to me strikingly similar in structure to that of Benjamin’s view of the way technology both is the source and the cure for the malady of technological alienation and shock, considering the quote above. Functioning homeopathically, film technology innervate the collective sensorium in actuality to such a degree that the release of the psychic shield through, and by the sensory experience of film, expels pent up tensions of “psychotic character” in the ‘mass’ audience. Thus, Benjamin’s identified the way film technology could work on the collective psyche as a purgatory function, and create a “psychic immunization”. It is also interesting to note the clear analogy between Benjamin and Aristotle in their similar emphasis on the connection between catharsis and mimesis. In Aristotle, the two terms are not clearly separate, as mimesis invokes the form or structure of the play, and catharsis its function or purpose.<sup>261</sup> The same can be seen in how Benjamin sees the mimetic as the structural component of innervation and the healing “collective laughter” as the completeness of cathartic purpose. Yet another point where Benjamin entails clear Aristotelian similarities is in relation to the emphasis both put on the importance of realizing mimetic action as imitation. Aristotle sees that when imitation is seen as imitation, and reaches completion as imitation, that catharsis comes about. Thus catharsis is the natural culmination of mimesis, in this sense: The recognition that the play is just mere play, not real life. It is a sensuous experience, and a passing out of the body, instead of its assimilation into grounds for action.<sup>262</sup> This corresponds in many ways to the understanding Benjamin portrays in seeing the mimetic innervation between “second” technology (film) and the collective consciousness. There is in reality no actual merger between human *Physis* and *Techne*. Only through realizing the imaginative or rhetorical character of this interaction can true redemption take place. “The social function of film” is destructive yet creative. In the Artwork essay, the key message is that only through redemption of the mimetic, as imitation, as play, can Benjamin see

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<sup>259</sup> M. Beardsley, *Aesthetics; From classical Greece to the present*. p. 64

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid*, p. 65

<sup>261</sup> John McCumber, *Aristotelian Catharsis and the Purgation of Woman*, *Diacritics*, Vol. 18, No. 4, p. 56

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid*, p. 60

reproductive technologies invoke catharsis.

If we see this emphasis on *innervation* as a conceptual tool for the politization of art, in response to the aesthetization of politics, implemented by the rise of fascism, we are far off a restored sensorium to an instinctually intact state. Being bound up with the fate of the mimetic faculty, collective *innervation* rests on how Benjamin sees mimesis as referring to a practice that bridges the gap between subject and object. In short, he attempts to find a way out of the conditioned split, induced by modernity, between experience and agency.<sup>263</sup> The mimetic is invoked as process, activity, as ritual or play. Thus, he sees the mimetic impulse as a mode of cognition. This includes bodily, sensuous or tactile forms of perception.

Having the same fate as the auratic character, the mimetic faculty is only seen vividly in its decline and decay. Its emergence as a concept stands in relation to the dissolution of what it claims to signify. The emphasis on mimesis for Benjamin is not motivated by a desire for a return to a primal, more “spiritual” time in history. Instead, in the *Artwork* essay, he wants to attempt at “re-enchanting” the modern world, through a resurgence of mimetic powers within it. Benjamin complicates the mimetic, fictional dimension of play with the “dark compulsion to repeat”, the urge to do “the same thing over and over again”.<sup>264</sup> Inspired by Freud, he finds a way to reconfigure *Erlebnis*, and create a “the transformation of a shattering experience into habit”.<sup>265</sup> Repetition in play, as the child does, is for Benjamin connected to the existential quest for happiness, and through technological utilization, mimetic, playful repetition finds a liberating, apotropaic function<sup>266</sup>. Labor can potentially be an activity of self-realization.

Taken the above account of the relation between technology and mimetic repetition into account, a few questions come to mind in reading *To the Planetarium*. We recall how the mimetic interplay between the cosmos and man originally played itself out communally, and as a force that cannot be rejected. The emphasis is clearly on the mimetic repetition inherent in technology as “second nature”, not only in mankind: The objective is to “transform” rather than witness the decay of the mimetic

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<sup>263</sup> S. Buck-Morss, *Aesthetics and Anaesthetics*, p. 30

<sup>264</sup> W. Benjamin, *Artwork Essay*, SW Vol. 2 p. 120

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid*, p. 120

<sup>266</sup> M. Hansen, *Room-for-Play*, p.28

faculty.<sup>267</sup> As we have seen, reasons why he maintains such faith in a reconfigured and transformed mimetic practice are found in discarded or unconventional modes (e.g., the child, surrealism, experiments with hashish) of human perception, and within a technologically altered perceptive field; they all pertain to what Benjamin described as "Profane Illumination":

"The collective is a body too. And the *Physis* that is being organized for it in technology can, through all its political and factual reality, be produced only in that image space to which profane illumination initiates us."<sup>268</sup>

In this passage from his essay on Surrealism (1929), he envisaged the realization of the revolutionary project in terms of a transformed consciousness of a future collectivity. It resembles strikingly his vision of redeemed second nature in *To the Planetarium*: "In technology, a *physis* is being organized through which mankind's contact with the cosmos takes a new and different form from that which it had in nations and families."<sup>269</sup> Within the image space "initiated" by Profane Illumination, mankind's suppressed existential questions, or *Lebensfragen* can find room to be explored and answered. More importantly, through this image space, the genuine auratic trace is to be found.

## 25. Conclusion

What is the bottom line that Benjamin is getting at through his thoughts on technology, play, shattering and mimesis? Is there a real trace of the aura to be found? In following Benjamin's path from a diagnosis of the "hellish" state of modernity in which he lived, through the destruction of traditional modes of experience and the decay of the aura, he launched an alternative to the dire situation he saw modern man found himself. Only through wresting the revolutionary power from the destructive forces of technology could a new, redeemed proletariat emerge from the ruins of the world wars. In defining how technological shocks could be used in a constructive way, he envisaged a reawakening of the mimetic powers in man, and through this reawakening undoing the traumatized collective. Only through this awakening could a new interplay with technology take place, and through this interplay could the basic

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<sup>267</sup> W. Benjamin, On the Mimetic Faculty, SW2, p. 721

<sup>268</sup> W. Benjamin, Surrealism Essay, SW2, p. 217

<sup>269</sup> W. Benjamin, One Way Street, SW1, p. 487



needs of mankind be answered.

This essay has attempted to show how there is a clear and consistent thread running through Benjamin's writings, starting with *One Way Street*: Mimetic innervation fulfills the task of his theory of technology. It enacts a sensuous contact and communion with the cosmos through working "homeopathically", as a form of catharsis. Innervation, in conjunction with mimetic play is the pair of concepts that stands out in Benjamin's theoretical toolkit in the attempt at wrestling back the power from capitalist agendas, and empowering the proletariat. And this is done through the very technology that accelerated the process of the "decay of aura".

We have seen how Benjamin diagnosed the underlying reasons for the trauma of the First World War and the alienation and suppression of the masses in the decades that followed as being closely related to the misuse of technological potential, channeled solely into a capitalist industrial framework. I have shown how Benjamin both embraced the technological destruction of aura and revealed the inherent problems associated with the loss of traditional modes of existence, and the way this destruction induced a reconstitution of human experience. As a response to the ambiguous nature and role of modern technological progress, Benjamin developed a critical theory of technology, and through it aimed at evolving beyond a technological determinism. This was mainly done by developing a theory of technology where the concepts of mimetic play and innervation play a decisive role. I have argued that what Benjamin is aiming at in this utopian understanding of technology in *One Way Street*, and the *Artwork* essay is a *re-enchantment* of the mundane, everyday world of modernity, or a restoration of the classical aesthetic dimensions of experience. Further, I have shown how the *Artwork* essay is a continuation of the main theses in *To the Planetarium*. Through film and photographic technology, the very technology that created the old world of "incarceration" will be exploded, leading to an "adventurous journey among the scattered ruins".

More than any other 20<sup>th</sup> century critic, Benjamin theorized the tyranny of discursive reason and insisting on the irreducibility of an embodied experiential domain, bound up with the body. Through my reading his theory of technology, I have argued that his concept of the decay of aura entails the existence of both genuine and non-genuine traces. I have also shown how Benjamin saw the way the perception of children could be seen as examples of original mimetic play, and evidence of the existence of the "mimetic faculty" in modern humans. Further, in unraveling the

concept of mimetic innervation I have emphasized its role in *One Way Street* and the *Artwork* essay as inherently linked to our understanding of technology as “second technology and nature as “second” nature. Being bound up with the ancient understanding of mimetic practice as embodied *innervation*, the cathartic effect that technological innervation is seen by Benjamin as uncovering this mimetic faculty. Within a collective mode of reception in contact with a technologically imbued second nature, this clears the way for a possible redemption of repressed existential needs, denied by the conditions of society.

In "Some Motifs on Baudelaire" Benjamin develops a model of technology that mirrors his cosmological conception of technology sketched in "*To the Planetarium*". World War I was a harbinger of a "new barbarism", and through its sheer horror of unprecedented destruction, it forces mankind to recognize its error: the error of dismissing the collective experience of the cosmos as unimportant, avoidable and of private concern. The War is construed by Benjamin as a deed of Nature itself, as an agent of a technologically infused cosmos. As we have seen above, the central issue in his theory of technology is related to mankind's need to establish a felicitous and non-destructive form of collective cosmic communion. That being said, what relevance can we recover of Benjamin's thought without relapsing into an emphasis on their out-datedness? Whatever hopes we may indeed have of establishing and maintaining mimetic contact with an ever increasingly technological second nature may require that we follow Benjamin's somewhat obscure and intricate trajectory from a theory of profane illumination to one of physiological mimesis. A path I have attempted to give a modest description of in this paper. If we aspire to implement the liberating project Benjamin constructs to our own reality, we must refuse to compromise the basic heterogeneity he maintains between the root physiological reality of innervation encompassed in *To the Planetarium* and the cognitive grounding he gives it in the *Artwork Essay* and *Surrealism* text. In this way, can the more fundamental philosophical project Benjamin was unable to complete, find new and fruitful pathways.

Being a border, surface and interface, mimetic innervation functions as mankind's alternative against a repetition of world war. Facing yet another “slave-revolt” of technology, in the political situation of our own time, these thoughts may show renewed relevance, as the War against Terror still leaves the “tiny, fragile, human body” vulnerable and exposed to technologically rendered destruction taking

place in Iraq and other places on the planet.

Technology elicits a destructive clearing away of suppressive modes of perception through the *innervation* with the collective consciousness. I have attempted to show how Benjamin's dialectical conception of destructive/shattering vs. creative/healing relationship related to technology. This destructive/creative conjunction is seen clearest in the Optical unconscious. This is one example of a technical medium, or space into which a restored mimetic capacity plays itself out. To become effectual mimetic *innervation*, the optical unconscious, as psychoanalytically inflected temporality, needs to engage with the collective subjectivity of mimetic innervation. Only if the extension of the human sensorium converts into an active, empowering incorporation of the apparatus on the part of the Cinema audience, or collective, can this transformation occur. Benjamin's aspirations on behalf of technologies of reproduction can in retrospect seem unrealistic, and flawed. His hopes for the mass-reception of films of montage-like character was short lived, and today, film is just as much a realm of myth and phantasmagoric character as urban society was in Benjamin's own time. In addition, the real revolutionary force of what would invoke the collective innervation on a grand scale has never emerged, even in countries where Communism is predominant. Yet, the collective mimetic *innervation* envisaged within the cinema combines *both* abstract and concrete connotations: It exemplifies an alternative mode of interaction and utilization of technology per se, creating novel ways to harness its previously misused potential. Only the proletariat, in its necessary collectivity can utilize this potential. For Benjamin, the private, bourgeois-capitalist paradigm necessarily culminates in war. Secondly, it refers to the actual cinematic experience, where the audience itself becomes the collective, and an actual alternative interaction with technology and modernity.

Benjamin attempts to recover a corporeal mimeticism that promotes a form of embodiment anchored in the "tiny, fragile human body". This is not a return to a primordial, pristine interaction with nature as was the case with the "first" technology. Instead, bodily mimeticism entails an embrace and not rejection of the shattering nature of technology, and its "otherness". Through the encounter with this otherness Benjamin sees potential communion with a new cosmos, and through this encounter humanity may find answers to their long-repressed *Lebensfragen*. Mimetic innervation may function as an allegorical steppingstone for surpassing the dualistic and unwholesome splitting of experience as *Erfahrung* into agency, object and

observer.<sup>270</sup> It can redeem the splitting of *Erfahrung* and through it the original auratic trace, by way of adjusting our experiential capacity to address the concrete, material realities of a technologically infused second nature. For Benjamin, this transformation of experience is not a relapse to an instrumental approach to the present”.<sup>271</sup> Instead, it calls for recognition of our outmoded perception of reality. To wrest a truly redeemed yet liberated proletariat from the “Ur-history” of modernity, mankind must perform a revaluation of our priorities as practical embodied agents. If mankind is to grasp the technological becoming that continually evolves before its eyes, an innervation of the collective body needs to address the desire for embodied contact with the cosmos, to complete mankind as a species’ development. As stated in *To the Planetarium*:

Men as a species completed their development thousands of years ago; but mankind as a species is just beginning his.<sup>272</sup>

Benjamin sees this development as dependent on our capacity to radically expand human consciousness toward a grander perception of nature and cosmos:

The paroxysm of genuine cosmic experience is not tied to that tiny fragment of nature that we are accustomed to call “Nature.”<sup>273</sup>

Exactly such contact with a grander cosmos forms the object of the mimetic sensuousity, imparted by our now miniaturized and commodified technologies. It is what gives capitalist utilization of technology power. Whatever hopes for redeeming modernity of its cultural commitments can only come through a deepening of our mimetic command over this properly un-representable, immediate and non-cognitive experiential dimension. Benjamin insisted that only a collective awakening from the phantasmagorical dreams of mass culture can mankind truly face this existential “otherness”.

Technology's "otherness" needs to be recognized, but to what extent could we see our interaction with it as based on play, or interplay? This point can bring our attention yet again to *One Way Street*, where reflections on the technological and the

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<sup>270</sup> S. Buck-Morss, *Aesthetics and Anaesthetics*, October 1992, p. 30

<sup>271</sup> M. Hansen 1993, *Room-for-Play: Benjamin's Gamble with Cinema*, October 109, October Magazine, MIT, pp. 3-45 p. 9

<sup>272</sup> W. Benjamin, *One Way Street*, SW1, p. 487

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid*, p. 487

techniques of the individual body emerge with emphasis on what Wohlfarth deemed the mythic/historical triads. Does Benjamin aim for a secular, worldly redemption, or just the liberation of the proletariat? This loosely relates to the mending or return to an edenic harmony analogous to his reading of the Kabbalistic *Tikkun Olam* (mending the world). *Tikkun* is oriented towards the future, and the revolution of the proletariat is its secular manifestation. The mythic circle comes to completion, but only if instigated through the action of mankind itself. After the shattering, there is redemption, or repair of the “broken vessel”, connected to the work of humanity, and accordingly brings the possibility of the messianic age. The Messiah is not coming into this world but is a product of man’s work of creation. It becomes a symbol of the completion of *Tikkun*. Benjamin’s interpretation of this principle is translated into artistic practice, and political action. Not being a practitioner of Judaism, nor a theistic believer of the Messiah, he is instead an interpreter and critical observer of culture.<sup>274</sup> His project is one of theorizing the ruinous and inherently barbaric material conditions of modernity. Through his utilization of various creative theories, like Surrealism, Freudianism, Marxism, Dadaism and Kabbalism among others, he aspires to find grounds for a mending, or redemption of the conditions of the world *within* mundane existence. The messianic is thus a symbolic figure of the completed re-construction of wholeness in the world.<sup>275</sup> If we look back at Benjamin’s theory of technology, it reveals the dialectic between the two terms intimately related concepts of dissemination, fragmentation of dispersal (*die Zerstreung*) and collection, assemblage, gathering together (*die Sammlung*). This dialectical constellation reveals itself, and their Kabbalistic notions of *shevira* and *tikkun*.

How is Benjamin going answer his fundamental question concerning mankind's relation to technology? A more precise question would rather be in what way can mankind establish and maintain a sound and balanced contact with the ever complexifying, technologically driven cosmos in our contemporary age? There may not be any answer to this question, and a reading of Benjamin’s theory of technology may evoke more questions than it can answer. But the core of his theory of technology was an attempt at creating new ways of interaction with a larger field of experience. His example can help us construct the analytical tools needed to resist

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<sup>274</sup> B. Plate, Walter Benjamin, Religion and Aesthetics, p. 33

<sup>274</sup> Ibid, p. 33

seductions of disembodiment projected by contemporary reproductive and virtual technologies.

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